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NEBULA

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NEBULA

SCIENCE FICTION

Vol. 1

Editor: PETER HAMILTON JR.

No. 3

Novel:

- FREIGHT** **E. C. Tubb** 68
From Venus came the priceless rejuvenating serum — in exchange, went hundreds of men and women—never to return.

Novelette:

- LIMBO** **William F. Temple** 3
When Nazism engulfed Earth it fell to a few incurable invalids in a Martian sanatorium to uphold the Banner of Freedom.

Short Stories:

- MR. UDELL** **David S. Gardner** 36
ENIGMA **Michael Hervey** 43
THE BEAUTIFUL WOMAN **Charles Beaumont** 46
ALL MEN KILL **H. J. Campbell** 63

Departments:

- Look Here** **The Editor** 2
Scientifilm Previews **Forrest J. Ackerman** 114
Electric Fan **Walter A. Willis** 116
Guided Missives **The Readers** 118
Science-Fiction Crossword Puzzle **A. C. Thorne** 120

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Look here . . .

First a piece of really good news: The sales of the second edition of NEBULA were so encouraging that the publishers have decided to put the magazine on a bi-monthly schedule very soon, certainly before the end of 1953.

This is due only to one thing. The constancy and good-taste of you, the readers, and if that kind of support continues, the sky (or space!) is the limit of NEBULA'S progress.

The readers certainly went for issue two in a big way, which proves beyond all doubt that it's good science-fiction you're after, not the half-baked, detective-sex stuff that seems to be creeping into so many contemporary science-fiction magazines.

Off course, these magazines are mostly selling at 1/6, and its very probable that they are printing the best *they can afford*. The extra 6d. you pay for NEBULA enables me to pay higher author-rates than any other British magazine of this type; it is your insurance policy for really good stories; stories by authors like Eric Frank Russell who has earned world acclaim for the sheer beauty of his science-fiction writing. Univer-

sally acclaimed as Britain's top-notch writer, a new story by Mr. Russell appears for the first time in a British magazine since the war in the next edition of NEBULA.

In the last day or two a lot of people have been writing me on the subject of using reprints of stories that have already appeared in the U.S.A. At the moment there is a reprint mania going on in certain British magazines. So, once and for all, I'd like to state that this will never happen in NEBULA. I know how disappointing it is when you visit a book store and buy up every magazine in sight for a nice week-end's reading and then discover that you've read half of the stories already, or you've bought the same one twice over! No, reprints in NEBULA will be rare—and worthwhile.

As is becoming a habit with readers of NEBULA, the favourite story in issue two was a short: E. C. Tubb's "Dark Solution," though the lead novel, F. G. Rayer's "Thou Pasture Us" ran it fairly close until the end. K. H. Brunner's "Brainpower" and F. J. Ackerman's "Atoms and Stars" were almost invariably classed third and fourth respectively.

Peter Hamilton Jr.

LIMBO

*When Nazism engulfed Earth it fell to a few incurable invalids
in a Martian sanatorium to uphold the Banner of Freedom*

Illustrated by Bob Clothier

Chapter I

THE GREAT masses of falling water became blurred, as if the video screen were made of gelatine and an invisible hand was shaking it. For a moment of self-disgust Martin thought the tears had escaped his self-control, that he was blubbering. He had never felt more like it. He was glad he was alone.

The voice droned on: "Our viewpoint here is on the bridge from the mainland to Goat Island, where perhaps the mighty rush of the waters is seen at its most awe-inspiring. . . ."

"Oh, why don't you shut up and let me hear the thunder of it?" growled Martin, angry because of his moment of shame. But the blurring became worse, and it was not his doing. The sun, erratically scattering its ions in bursts, had flung a shower across the 40,000,000-mile line of vision waves from Earth and turned the majesty of Niagara into a meaningless stream of colors.

Gross stuck his head round the door. Gross never entered a room directly. He'd always push the door open a little way and peep cautiously round it, as though he feared there might be a lion in the room. Or maybe it was merely Harris he was dodging. If Harris was there, Gross would withdraw silently. But if it were any or all of the others, then Gross would go through his mischievous elf routine, grinning at them with just his head

showing round the door, as if he'd caught them at some naughty game.

Everyone was expected to grin back, and if not actually say, then at least convey: "Ah, here's old Gross. He'll cheer us up. Don't know how we'd get on without him."

Then Gross would make some crack, insert the rest of himself into the room, and become at least in his own estimation the life of the party.

Martin wasn't in the mood for badinage, and awaited the crack gloomily.

It came. "Glory be! Aren't they projecting that Picasso upside down?"

"It's supposed to be Niagara," said Martin heavily, switching off the set.

"I can't stand those travelogues," said Gross, coming in, the preliminaries over. He waved a finger at the double row of empty armchairs. "Nor can the others, that's obvious. You must be a masochist."

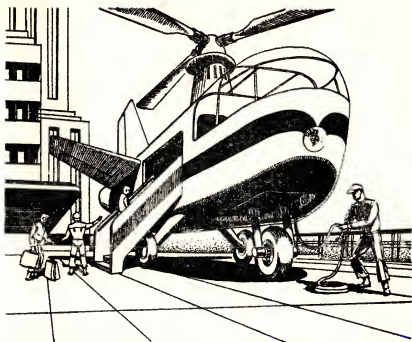
Martin reflected. Perhaps it was true. While it had lasted it had been torture. It had recalled too poignantly that moment of childhood when he first saw and heard the Falls. His mother had heard that the air at Niagara was good for the lungs, and she'd taken him there nominally for a month.

Thin, weak and haggard from his chronic asthma, he'd stood there in a rapturous daze, hypnotized by the thundering power of the spectacle. There was no weakness or hesitance about this body of water: it was letting itself go full out, all of the time. Where he would have been paralyzed by fear, it made swiftly and eagerly for the brink and leaped with a roar of abandon into the gulf. It was naked might untrammelled strength. It was all that he was not.

His mother was shouting something about horsepower. He didn't turn. She grabbed his shoulder and swung him round. She put her big, red, bulbous-eyed face close to his and bellowed. It was as if she'd sensed a rival in the Falls, and was trying to shout it down.

Afraid of her anger at his inability to understand, he gazed anxiously at her fat, red lips, trying to read what she mouthed. ". . millions. . horsepower. ." He nodded as if he'd understood her completely. Satisfied, she turned away.

He could see now the befurred bulk of her leaning against the iron railing. He remembered the weak stab of hope that the rail-



ing might break from the strain of her considerable weight and the Falls would swallow her forever. Surely the Falls were stronger than she? Then came the fiercer stab of guilt, and the fear of the unknown things which might happen to him if she were gone. Who cared about him enough even to curse him?

They stayed at Niagara only two weeks. It was time enough for the Falls to become his friend, for him to hear its voice calling through the spray: "Don't be afraid, Martin. Be like me. Let yourself go." His asthma was noticeably better—noticeably, because his mother remarked on it. But it didn't influence her to stay the rest of the month. She was tired of Niagara, as she became tired of any place after a few days. Miami was to be the next cure.

He didn't like Miami, and his asthma returned and reached its worst. He fought for breath on the burning balcony of the hotel, while the sea rolled feebly and listlessly below, heeding not his agony nor showing any example. He nearly died. His mother saved his life by becoming suddenly bored with Miami and taking him to the Ozarks. He dared once to ask to return to Niagara.

"That awful place? Why, you can't hear yourself speak." He never asked again.

They went to Devon, in England, and Provence, and St. Moritz, the blue Italian Riviera and beggar-ridden Cairo. And when they'd exhausted the Earth, they came to the new experimental sanatorium on Mars. It had some effect on Martin's health: his attacks became less frequent. It also had some effect on his mother's health: it killed her after three weeks.

That was five years ago, and he was still here, still uncured.

As Martin hadn't responded, Gross had gone to the wide window, and now stood regarding the red swirl of the Martian landscape, the half-obscured line of the dead ribbon town striking plumb south.

"Maybe you're right," said Martin, slowly. "On the other hand, I might even get back there some day. But for you and the others, I know—"

He stopped abruptly. Gross's large head nestled down even more deeply between his bent, narrow shoulders. His slight, hunched figure shrank in upon itself.

"I'm—I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking—"

"You mean you *were* thinking but you didn't intend to say it aloud," said Gross, still with his back turned. "It's perfectly true. For you such things are views of the Promised Land seen across Jordan—and you're considerably younger than Moses. For us, cracked hearts in cracked bodies, it's revisiting the glimpses of the moon. We're permanent outcasts."

There was no sign of the funny man about Gross now. Like most humorists, he was fundamentally a frustrated and unhappy person.

Martin bit his lip, then went over to the window also. He scanned the sky of deepest blue.

"The Monthly is due in at any moment," he said. "Hope they've brought my pears this time. Last month I didn't write it very clearly on the list and they brought prunes instead."

The Monthly was the rocket ship plying between the sanatorium and Earth, bringing provisions, mail, and any terrestrial shopping the patients had ordered.

The man at his side refused either to be amused or diverted from his self-pity. He said: "If I weren't a coward, if I weren't afraid of death, I'd take the Monthly back and have a last wild fling on Earth. Escape this deadly *sameness*. Heaven knows I've tried to put a cheerful face on it here."

"Wine, women, and song, eh?"

"Wine and song, anyway. No woman has ever looked at

me. Do you blame 'em?" Gross's lips were wry, and the underlying bitterness of his life was evident in his tone. "Still, that never stopped me from looking at *them*. I'd give anything—except my life—for a few nights on 42nd Street and Broadway. There's a burlesque theater up on—"

"She blows!" exclaimed Martin. A solitary piece of white confetti had become visible on the azure backcloth. It grew steadily, became a disc of pale flame, then a rival to the small Martian sun. The chemical braking rockets were working hard. Now they slowed the Monthly with such a firm hand that the sound of its own passage overtook it and came howling down the sky like an excited herald.

The gleaming ship itself followed ever more slowly, setting itself gently on end at last a couple of miles away, the minimum safety distance. The Reddeth swirled thickly around the fins it stood upon, snapping at them with a million fangs, blindly and stupidly trying to gnaw them away. But, although scratched and polished by the abrasive, they were as durable as the walls of the sanatorium itself.

The flap near the nose of the ship fell open, became a horizontal platform. The collapsible autogyro, already loaded, was pushed out onto it. In a few minutes it took off, its vanes speeding like those of an electric fan to maintain itself in the rare Martian air.

Martin and Gross took the elevator to the roof to meet it.

Dr. Robel was there already, and so was the hulking Harris. Apart from the female nurses, these four were the only ones constitutionally strong enough to stand the thin, bitterly cold air, or indeed to make a physical effort of any magnitude beyond tottering from wheel-chair to armchair.

There were a dozen other patients, all advanced heart cases, and they rarely ventured more than a few slow steps. They knew they were living on borrowed time, and they wanted to spin it out as far as possible. Big Harris was contemptuous about all of them and Martin and Gross as well. But he admired Dr. Robel. So did all the others.

Robel was calm, efficient, untiring. He was physically strong, and spent much of his spare time on body culture. Sometimes he'd give them a show of weight-lifting, lifting with one hand barbells of such a size that he would crack that no one on Earth could

do the same. Which was perfectly true. You had to come to Mars to see such an exhibition.

Robel looking up at the glittering approach of the autogyro, heard Martin and Gross come and knew without turning his head that the usual quartet was complete.

"Hello, you two. Come to meet the young lady, eh?"

"And none of your silly dirty cracks in front of her," growled Harris at Gross.

"What are you talking about, if for once you happen to know?" said Gross, staring coldly at Harris.

"No one told us anything about any young lady," said Martin. "Who is it—another nurse?"

"No, another heart case," said Robel. "Her name's Monica Gibbon, she's twenty-two, adopted daughter of Hendrik Gibbon, the psychiatrist. He must be a very old man now—I met him—once in my student days in Vienna, and he was nearly seventy then. He's coming with her."

"To stay?" asked Gross.

"For the first month—not longer, I hope. I don't like other medical professionals staying here, even if their line isn't mine. Doctors always think they know better than anyone, especially their rivals."

With a great beating of the air, the autogyro lowered itself to the broad roof, bumped and was still except for the vanes moaning themselves to rest.

The pilot got out with practised step. The two passengers got out slowly and carefully, because one was very old and the other very ill. Nevertheless, their Earth-accustomed muscles yet put too much effort into their movements, and they bounced on the edge of imbalance at every step. Their infirmities saved them from the ridiculous, and Martin was touched and went instinctively to help the girl.

Just as automatically, it seemed, Robel interposed his squat bulk between them and gave his hand to Monica Gibbon. Martin stopped, nonplussed for a moment, and in that moment a fierce little flame of hatred for Robel flared in him. It was a blind hatred, because he didn't know what he hated. There were things he didn't like about Robel: the dark hairs curling from his nostrils and thick on his hands and wrists, his exasperating imperturbability, his genial exhibition of his strength. There was jealousy in his hatred, but something more, too. Robel was

somehow always coming between him and—something, some unrealized desire.

Harris was already assisting Hendrik Gibbon, who was thin and stooped, yellow-faced and incredibly wrinkled. He looked about a hundred years old. He shuffled with the sagging knees of senility. But the brown eyes under the white tufted eyebrows were clear and wise.

Martin and Gross hovered hesitantly around, useless, not needed. They exchanged a brief glance, understanding their comradeship in weakness but not glad of it.

Chapter II

The big lounge was quiet in the evening. The patients sat apart in their island armchairs silently reading and re-reading the mail, books and magazines the Monthly had brought them. They had lived together for years. They knew exactly what each of the others had to say, because they'd heard it over and over. It was nice to hear a different voice, even if it spoke only from handwriting or print. The interference from the sun was continuing to make the television theater useless.

They all looked up when a woman nurse wheeled in Monica Gibbon. Here was a new face, a different voice, from the Old Planet. (They often referred to Earth as the "Old Planet," forgetting that the modernity of the sanatorium didn't extend beyond its walls and that they dwelt in the midst of an antiquity beside which Earth was new-born).

The face satisfied them: though thin and pale, with dark rings under the eyes, it retained youth and a fragile beauty. The voice was a disappointment: it was low and soft, not much above a whisper, and in the tenuous air it didn't carry to their respective islands. In response to their greetings, Miss Gibbon smiled and murmured inaudibilities. Between them and her, the wide spaces of the carpet were almost as difficult for them to cross as the interplanetary gulfs, and so they smiled back at her and waved, and then returned to their reading.

Monica Gibbon sat alone at the window gazing at the Martian evening.

Martin approached her uncertainly.

He ventured: "I'm afraid the sunset will disappoint you. You see, we've practically no clouds on Mars, except sometimes over the polar caps."

She smiled. "Sometimes we have too many on Earth. . . . There, I'm talking like a Terrestrial. I suppose I must look upon myself as a Martian now."

"You'll find it hard to. We still regard Earth as our home, and feel we're exiles from Paradise. There used to be an observatory upstairs, until Dr. Robel shut it down — too many people upset themselves peering through the telescope at home. So Earth remains just a star to us now." He looked out at the few points of light in the darkening sky. "It won't be visible tonight—it's already set."

The autogyro, gleaming redly in the last rays of the sun, landed on the open flap of the distant rocket. You could just see its vanes folding about it like petals.

"That's its last trip, I think," said Martin. "Yes, the flap's beginning to close. It must have made forty trips today, to and fro. It's an exasperatingly slow way of unloading when you think of what a couple of two-ton trucks could do overland."

"I understand that it's the Reddeth that stops free travel on the ground. What is that exactly? It's like the mistral on Earth—I've heard of it, but have only a dim idea of what it is. Is that sandstorm outside anything to do with it, or is that just a passing phenomenon?"

"No, that's the Reddeth. It's worse than a sandstorm, though. It's wind-born particles, needles, little knives of terrifically hard rock hard as adamant. All sharp edges and fine points. In this area the rock is red: in other areas, green. The wind never abates—it blows all over Mars. Unlike the mistral, it doesn't blow steadily in one direction — it tears about all ways, in terrific gusts and cross-current vortices. Often it reaches cyclone force. The strange thing is that it keeps very near to the ground. A couple of hundred feet up there's only a faint breeze, not enough to carry the rock fragments—you can breathe up there."

"Then why didn't they build this place on a mountain?"

"There aren't any mountains on Mars. The old Martians must have longed for some so that they could live above the storm. Instead, of course, they had to build their covered cities—there's part of one over there: you can't see it very well in this light.

It's an amazing network—they could travel to almost any part of the planet without ever having to face the Reddeth."

"Reddeth—a corruption of 'Red Death,' isn't it?"

"Yes. No one—"

"Hello, hello. Well, d'you think you'll buy the joint, Miss Gibbon?"

It was Gross, being wheezily breezy. He grinned at them as though he expected them to fall on his neck. There was a guffaw from one of his adjacent fans, and Gross glanced sideways to acknowledge the tribute.

"This is my friend, Gross," said Martin. "He's something of a wag. Don't ever take him seriously."

"That's the trouble," said Gross, shaking hands with her. "No one takes me seriously any more. I could never succeed as a poet or an artist now—people would always think I was only joking. It's a helluva handicap."

"Have you any poetic or artistic leanings?" she asked.

"None whatever," he assured her with a nicely executed twinkle. But she missed the twinkle as she turned to look behind him.

"Here comes my father."

Hendrik Gibbon came along with a sort of mincing, funeral gait. He said: "Just when I'm getting too old to walk anyway, I have to learn to do it all over again."

Gross said: "Well, there's one advantage on this planet: when you fall, you do it so slowly that there's always time to prepare for a good landing. When I was a kid I always fell on my nose three times as fast, which accounts for its shape."

The old man gave a brief chuckle, and Gross looked gratified. Martin hefted one of the big armchairs across so that Gibbon could sit with his daughter. The psychiatrist gave him a keen look.

"That's some effort for a heart case. This place must have done you a world of good."

"I'm not a heart case," said Martin, shortly.

"No? I'd understood it was cardiac cases only here."

I'm the exception. I've suffered badly from asthma all my life. My mother heard the air here was germ-free, and insisted on bringing me."

"It seems to have cured you," said Gibbon.

"Not quite. Not yet. I still get bad attacks. I'm afraid I'm

not as strong as I look. Still, Dr. Robel thinks another two or three years may see me well enough to go home."

The girl, who'd been watching his face, looked away, out of the window. Martin knew what she was thinking, and cursed himself silently for the same old mistake. Only incurable heart cases were admitted here. She would never go home again.

"Your mother—"

"My mother is dead," Martin anticipated abruptly. Gibbon noted the harshness, and speculated about it. He said: "I'm sorry" mechanically.

There was an awkward silence. Gross felt the urge of his duty as jester.

"D'you know what they call this place?" he said, brightly. "Limbo—it's between heaven and hell." He laughed, and was the only one who did.

"Look, the ship's going," said Monica, suddenly.

Darkness had fallen like a curtain and hidden the ship itself. Invisible venturi added a quota of flaming gas to the maelstrom of the Reddeth. A gleaming white pillar, red-streaked, built itself out there in the night, at first slowly, and then faster and faster. Then it levitated itself suddenly and began to shrink again with distance. At last it became a star among all the other stars. Then it faded from the field.

"Shan't see it again for a month," said Gross.

"About your asthma," said Gibbon, looking at Martin. "You know, it's nothing to do with germs or air. The cause of asthma lies wholly between one's mind and one's nervous system."

"And every man sees God in his own image," said the deep, calm voice of Dr. Robel. While they were watching the rocket, he'd come up silently behind them on the soft carpet. "You know the story of the elephant in the dark room, and the six men who'd never seen an elephant trying to identify it by touch alone? So, of course, they could only imagine it by reference to their own experience. There were six silly answers, all wrong. But all six men insisted that they were right. The only difference between a physician and a psychiatrist is that a physician comes to one conclusion and a psychiatrist comes to a dozen. Are you a Freudian, a Jungist, an Adlerite, behaviourist, a dianetician, or what, Mr. Gibbon?"

"You could call me a holist, Doctor," said Gibbon, showing no resentment. His wise eyes studied Robel.

Robel lifted his eyebrows. "So?" He looked down at Monica. "How are you feeling, Miss Gibbon?"

"Much easier, thank you."

"Tomorrow you will feel better, and next week almost normal. But you can never be better than that 'almost.' The lesser gravitation here will rest your heart—its muscles won't have to strain against the mighty pull of Earth. But it won't mend it, I'm afraid. You must accept what that means."

"I have accepted it."

"Then you're wiser than most of these here who sit and eat out their diseased hearts for Earth." He made no attempt to lower his voice. The other patients heard, and tried to appear even more engrossed in their reading matter. His gaze played sardonically on Gross, who gave a feeble half-smile and looked away. He went on: "You mustn't think me unsympathetic. But I believe that people should accept the facts, then make the best of them. Brooding and self-pity do nothing but harm. Alas, most people are so weak and childish."

Gibbon said: "Severe illness makes most people weak and childish. They don't see with the eyes of a healthy man, as you do."

"I keep myself fit," said Robel, complacently, ignoring the point. "How long shall you be staying, Mr. Gibbon?"

"Until—" For once, Gibbon hesitated.

"Until the end—of one of you? Good. I was afraid you would return to Earth on the next Monthly. I shall look forward to some interesting discussions with you. Goodnight." Robel made his farewell inclusive, and left the lounge in surprisingly long strides for his height. Martin looked after him, wondering why Robel had changed his opinion about the desirability of two doctors under one roof.

"What a ghastly man," said Monica.

Martin said: "He's not usually so offensive or tactless. I've never liked him personally—I don't think anyone does, though they admire and respect him. Something seems to have got into him tonight—he seems mighty full of himself."

"I'll say," said Gross. "I thought he was going to burst at the seams."

"I think he will," said Gibbon, thoughtfully, "if I've classed him aright."

"And here comes another of that class," muttered Gross, as Harris came over to them. Martin performed the introductions.

Harris boomed: "It'll be nice to hear some fresh conversation instead of the same stale old cracks." He glowered at Gross, whose spindly figure began to quiver. "Now there's quite a number of things you should know about this place. . . ." Gross slipped quietly away to bed.

Harris left them about an hour later, repeating that it was grand to hear some fresh conversation.

"He meant that it was grand to have a fresh audience," said Martin.

Monica gave a little laugh. "I never said anything except 'Yes' and 'No.' "

"You must have been bored, sir," said Martin to Gibbon, who was reclining in his chair with his eyes half shut. He had contributed verbally to the "conversation" even less than his daughter.

"Not at all," said Gibbon. "I've been very interested."

"Father is never bored when there are people talking," said Monica. "He's always observing them, trying to classify them, working out what makes them tick."

Martin went to bed wondering what class he'd been put in, supposing that Gibbon had given him a thought.

Actually, Gibbon had given him quite a lot of thought.

Chapter III

Over a week later Martin was again with Monica at the same window. He was talking about the topography of Mars. The rest had given Monica new life. She was up and walking now, putting on flesh, regaining color.

"It's amazing to reflect that even now four-fifths of the cities remain unexplored," he was saying. "The trouble is that the Reddeth, after hundreds of thousands of years of unceasing attack, has worn the roofs thin in many places. And once the Reddeth penetrates, it silts up the cities for miles. The excavation work will have to be enormous before anything like a link up of the old network can be achieved."

"That, of course, can only be done from the inside?" said Monica. "I can't see how people could work outside in the Reddeth."

"No they couldn't. They'd have to wear such cumbersome space-suits to resist it that they'd be unable to move let alone

work. Any mechanical excavator would be sabotaged by grit and stone needles in no time, however carefully you tried to shield the works: there must always be *some* moving parts exposed."

"Has it always been like this, I wonder? Or was Mars once a pleasant place?"

"If it was always like this I don't see how life could have got a foothold on the planet at all."

"Perhaps the Martians were originally subterranean creatures, born in the darkness and trying to answer some strange call towards the sunlight, just as salmon come up from the unlit depths of the ocean," said Monica. "And having reached it, found they could only live under the transparent roofs of their cities, because of the Reddeth."

Martin shrugged. "It's possible. Further exploration may show. Many links of the network have never been seen. Sometimes I think of poor old Lowell and those other early astronomers who thought the things were canals, and having carefully mapped out a system, were bewildered to find it fading away and being replaced by another system. And then seeing the original system reappearing later on. They couldn't know that they were only seeing parts of one permanent system constantly being silted over and then blown clear again by the Reddeth."

"They should've had a trip over it in the autogyro," said Monica. "Brr! That scared me more than the take off from Earth."

"I've often suggested they cut out the autogyro, and instead drive a tunnel from here to the rocket landing area. Go under the Reddeth instead of over it. But the idea always gets shelved because they insist the sanatorium is still in an experimental stage and may never become permanent enough to warrant such labour and expense. They've been saying that for six years now."

"Let me see, you've been here for five of them, haven't you? Doesn't the place drive you nuts?"

"I'll say it does. If it weren't for the—" He stopped

"If it weren't for the hope of getting back," she prompted, gently.

Martin bit his lip. "I'm sorry. I try to keep quiet about it, but it slips out every now and then. It doesn't add to my popularity here."

"They ought to be glad for you," said Monica. "I am. I certainly hope you get home soon."

"Do you? You know, I'd rather miss you. . . ."

From that moment he began to think about missing her. And the more he thought, the more intolerable became the idea of never seeing her again. It took him another two days to admit to himself that he'd fallen in love. Another three days to gather the courage to declare his love. And he felt that he'd never get over the surprise of finding that it was reciprocated.

"Yes, I love you, but I'm not going to marry you, Martin," she said. "I can never go back to Earth. There's a chance that you can in a year or two. I'm not going to be a burden to you."

"Nonsense! I don't really believe I'll ever go back. I'll never be well enough. Anyhow, I couldn't leave you. If I were cured this instant, I'd never leave you."

"I wonder," she said, looking out at the dark night. Phobos was visible, creeping across the sky.

He wondered too.

Then the lights went out without even a preliminary flicker. There were faint cries of surprise from the others in the lounge. Never had such a thing happened. There'd been fading sometimes when Mars and Earth were at their greatest opposition: it was difficult to beam power past the sun. But there'd never been a sudden and total failure.

"It'll be all right," Martin assured the girl. "We've an emergency system. The lights will be on again in a—"

They came on before he'd finished speaking. "You see," he said.

Then they forgot the lights and talked about themselves. Presently, the rest of the patients were wheeled in, and Gross, Harris, and Gibbon entered in a group and came over to the pair.

Martin gave up his chair to Gibbon, who smiled his thanks.

"I wonder what it's all about?" remarked Harris. "Any ideas, Martin?"

"About what?—I don't get you."

"Didn't you hear Robel's heading us all in here for some sort of announcement in a few minutes?"

"No."

"I suppose he didn't bother to tell those who were already here. . . . Here he comes now."

Dr. Robel came in alone, calm but alert. He surveyed the room, counting the occupants, and smiled slightly when he saw that all were present. There was a central platform from which sometimes musical recitals were given: he mounted it.

"Will you all please give me your attention." The request was unnecessary : they were all watching him.

Hendrik Gibbon murmured: "Remember what I said about his bursting at the seams? Here comes the first split."

Robel said: "The combined radio, television, and power station on Earth which supplies this institution is out of order. We're cut off from all communication. For our light and heat we're dependent upon our emergency batteries. They should last at least two months, so you've nothing to worry about."

He paused. Then: "At least, you think you've nothing to worry about. But that's your mistake. You, who've been so nursed and coddled, have been thrown on the scrap heap. Where you belong—you should have all died years ago. I tell you this: the beam from Earth is permanently off. The power station has been blown to atoms: the last time the Monthly was here I spoke with the man who planted the bomb. He was one of the crew, and a man of my faith. He told me the time for which the bomb was to be set. It was fifteen minutes ago, and it went off to the second. That's the strength of the New Nazis — organization, timing. It was the strength of our glorious forebears. You may be sure that that was only one bomb among thousands which exploded at that second, and that the revolution has already succeeded—the Earth is in the power of the New Nazi armed forces. It had to come. Life is too strong a force to be fettered indefinitely by obsolete moral conventions or to be diverted into such blind alleys as the preservation of such fossils as yourselves. The weak, as ever, must go to the wall. The New Nazis aid only the strong and useful."

Martin felt sick at heart.

Harris jumped up, red-faced with anger. He stood there glaring at Robel, clenching his great fists.

"Nazis!" he bawled. "Are we going to have that old rubbish over again? Good heavens, some snakes take a lot of killing! Now, look here, Robel—"

He started towards the platform.

"Come back, Harris," said Gibbon, urgently. "Come back

But Harris went on his way, bellowing: "You needn't think and keep quiet."

you're going to get away with this. You're outnumbered here. If it comes to that, I can handle you myself."

"Then handle this," said Robel. He slipped a hand inside his jacket, and when it emerged it held one of the old-fashioned

pistols from the last war. There was a click. Harris spun round. Martin caught a horrified glimpse of the base disk of a needle, like a dime stuck in the centre of his forehead. He knew there was three inches of intensely electrified steel behind the disk, lancing through Harris's brain, and that the horrible ribbed head had opened and fastened like an anchor in the gray matter. . .

He retched as Harris fell full-length on the carpet. There were groans of horror all around. One feeble heart collapsed under the shock: its possessor died in his wheel-chair with no more than a single gasp.

Gross drew a shuddering breath. "He's mad!"

"It's a form of madness, but an inexcusable one," said Gibbon, quietly.

Robel stood there calmly. He glanced at his gun, then put it away.

"I doubt whether I'll ever need that again," he said. "Our large and fiery-tempered friend here was the only possible source of trouble. He was the only one among you with any spirit. He could have made a good Nazi if he weren't so wrong-headed and if his health had been better. The rest of you—" He laughed. "The rest of you I'd take on in a bunch with one hand tied behind my back. I needn't have told you anything. I could have let you fade away in ignorance. But you can't harm me, and I detest and despise the lot of you for wasting my time and ability. It pleases me to know you've one thought you can carry to your graves—Hitler is vindicated!"

His arm shot out in salute. His face set in the scowling, empty sternness of the soldier who has temporarily wiped out his own mind and become a robot respondent to any command given with authority if not with reason. He was willing to perform idiocy by numbers, in the cause of the greater idiocy.

He stepped down from the platform and marched out of the lounge, still staring fixedly ahead of him.

Gibbon stood up. "Please be calm, all of you. None of you is alone, we're all in this together. But Robel *is* alone—remember that. He's right in one thing—together our physical strength is no match for his. But we have intelligence, and we have each other's moral support. That's plenty, and we should be able to do something with it."

"But what?" asked someone, shakily.

"I don't know yet. First, I suggest a committee for action

from those of us who are well enough to act. That can only be my daughter and myself, Martin here, and Mr. Gross.

"What about the nurses?" asked Monica.

"I'm wondering about them, too. Mr. Gross, will you go and find out whether they're for or against us?"

"Sure," said Gross, not looking a bit sure. But he went.

Gibbon went and looked at the man who had died in his chair. He sighed, and came back to examine Harris, who was just as dead.

Gibbon sighed again. "I'm afraid we've lost our potentially most powerful ally—save one."

"Who else is there?" said Martin, huskily, and cleared his throat.

"You," said Gibbon, shooting him a penetrating glance from under his shaggy brows.

Martin said nothing. He felt the growing tightness in his chest which heralded another of his attacks.

Chapter IV

Half an hour later they were holding a council meeting in Hendrik Gibbon's room. Gross had reported that three of the five nurses were Nazis, and had been selected personally by Robel. They were keeping the remaining pair locked in their rooms. Meantime, they told Gross, the patients could fend for themselves: they weren't going to "run around after them any more."

Gross said: "I said: 'Look here, you can't let them—' And that big blonde piece snapped at me: 'Can't we? Are you going to make us?' I looked at them. I think they were never nurses at all: Robel must have gotten hold of a trio of acrobats. Any one of 'em could have broken me in two. So I shut up and came away."

"We'll have to attend to the Amazons after we've dealt with Robel," said Gibbon. "First things first."

"I don't want to sound defeatist," said Martin slowly, "but even supposing we do gain control here, what then? We'll still be at the mercy of the other maniacs on Earth who've cut our life-line. How could we few cripples hope to beat that lot? They've got us by the windpipe to start with. If we defeat Robel or not, the situation remains the same: we've only two months of life left."

"Two months of honourable life—or shame?" queried Gibbon, gently. "You've just seen a foul murder. Are you satisfied in your heart to let Robel get away with it, saying that it's none of your business? My friend, the lesson to be learned is '*He is dead who will not fight. And he who dies fighting has increase.*' We are civilization in little here but it is not size that matters, only standards. We're standard-bearers for civilization. No, the situation would *not* remain the same if we defeated Robel. The difference is that between an honorable death or a damned disgraceful one. It's a big difference. Don't you feel that?"

Martin mumbled "I—I don't know." He sought the reproach in Monica's eyes, but it wasn't there. Instead, she looked sympathetic. He clutched at the straw.

"What do you think Monica?"

"That father's perfectly right, of course. But I don't limit the choice to death. I think even father's being a defeatist there. We don't know that Robel's story is true. He says the power has been cut off. But he may merely have invented that yarn, and switched off the reception apparatus here for a time."

"The video's dead—I tried it," interposed Gross.

"Perhaps only disconnected," said Monica.

"But why?" Martin demanded. "What could be the point of such crazy behavior?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Monica. "I merely put it forward as an example that it doesn't do to jump to conclusions. Perhaps Robel's quite mad and doesn't know what he is doing."

"He knows what he's doing, Monica, and he can largely control what he's doing," said her father. "If he were quite mad, there'd be no point in our punishing him. His fault lies in yielding to primitive lusts, for power, for sadism—heaven knows what's lurking in his mind. He and his kind are a species of idiot, but only because they're weak and have voluntarily relinquished control."

"Weak!" exclaimed Gross. "I'd never say he was that. If he's weak, then I'm—"

"You're stronger than he is," said Gibbon. "So am I. And Monica." He turned to Martin. "And you could be stronger than any of us if you try."

"I've never been any sort of a hero," said Martin, gloomily. "My chest—"

"Chest nothing!" said Gibbon, sharply. "It's all in *your* mind. And, by heaven, I'm going to have it *out* of your mind be-

fore very much longer! You're jammed, but you're the best weapon in our armory. We've got to make use of you. We've got to make use of all our resources. They're precious few, lord knows. Now, let's see what we can muster against Robel. Are there any more guns or lethal weapons in the place, Martin?"

"No. I'm pretty certain of that. No need for them—there's nothing living on Mars except ourselves."

"H'm. Handy with your fists, Martin?"

"Never fought anyone in my life. My ch—" Martin checked, and a slow flush spread over his cheeks.

It was Gross who looked sympathetic this time. Monica was staring at the floor, thinking.

"Pity," said Gibbon. "You're the only one here with any muscles. We'll have to get them in working order. Now, has either of you any technical knowledge about electricity?"

"Not me," said Martin and Gross together.

"Not even elementary knowledge?"

"No."

"Nor me, either," said Gibbon. "I've made psychiatry my whole life. I was thinking perhaps we could prepare a booby trap for Robel—hitch up a stair-rail or a door-knob or something to the main battery and electrocute him. Never mind. There's more ways than one of killing a cat. Glass daggers, now—sharp splinters of glass. Fit handles to 'em, keep 'em in our pockets. Get within a yard of him, and then — remember the Ides of March! Exit the new Caesar. We'll break the glass over a picture—his own portrait in the lounge: there's poetic justice for you."

Martin looked at him aghast.

The old man was relishing every moment of this, planning with gusto the violence and blood-letting. For a moment Martin thought bitterly: "All right for *him*! He's too old to do it himself. But he knew underneath that Gibbon was no mere armchair warrior. The old man was guts all through, and if he could get near enough to Robel to stab him to the heart he'd attempt just that, even though his strength was probably quite inadequate. All the same, he told himself, it's not so bad risking your life if you've had a long and full one, as Gibbon had had. But he himself was young, and he'd never really lived yet. It would be terrible never to see Earth again—most unfair.

And all the time he knew he was rationalizing his cowardice.

Gross said: "Daggers are out. Only one firm supplied every

piece of glass in this place—Unbreakable Glass Manufacturers Inc.”

“That’s a shame,” said Gibbon. “I use an electric razor. I suppose everyone does these days.”

“Everyone here,” said Gross.

“What about cutlery?” said Monica.

“All plastic,” said Gross. “It’d break if you tried to stab. We might cut his throat if he’d obligingly keep still while we sawed at it.”

Martin felt the old constriction at his own throat. He choked and gasped and fought for breath. He lay back in his chair, striving to unfasten his collar. Gross jumped to his aid.

“Martin, what is it?” asked Monica, concernedly. But he couldn’t answer.

“It’s one of his asthmatic attacks,” said Gross. “The worst will be over in an hour or so, but he’ll be weak for days.”

“Let him lie on my bed for a bit,” said Gibbon. Between them, they helped him onto the bed. He lay there with the room swimming about him and had but a single purpose—to breathe air into lungs which seemed to be constricted by invisible hands. They did what they could, but time was the only nurse.

Presently, they returned to their deliberations, and between his convulsions hazy snatches reached Martin:

“ . . . chair-leg would make an effective blunt instrument.”

“ . . . get shot down if you approached him carrying that.”

“ . . . when he’s asleep But you bet the bedroom door’s locked.”

“ . . . plenty on our hands nursing the others.”

“ . . . undermine his confidence You with humor, Gross. Me, by suggestion. Then. . .”

He heard his own name mentioned a few times before he drifted off to sleep.

When he awakened, only Monica was there. She was sitting on the edge of the bed, watching him.

“Feel any better?”

“A little. Still. . . somewhat short. . . of breath,” he panted. “Where. . . others?”

“They’ve taken over the nursing duties. There are a dozen to be fed and looked after, you know. I’ll have to go and help them soon, after I’m through nursing you. But I feel pretty helpless. What can I do? Is there anything you want?”

“No. . . thanks. Have you decided how to. . . kill Robel?”

"We-ell, it was all pretty vague—you know what these committees are. The general line we're taking seems to be first to work on Robel's nerves, sap his confidence, and when he's weakened you're to try to overpower him and get his gun. Then we'll put him on trial—there can only be one verdict."

Martin groaned inside. Out of all the big talk by the others had come only this amorphous plan, the brunt of it falling on himself, who'd been too ill even to last out the meeting. Did democracy always have to combat totalitarianism with little more than a both-feet-off-the-ground optimism, divorced from reality? It was like making passes with a feather duster at a mad bull and blind-folding yourself first.

"I'm afraid Robel's. . . too practical. . . to be shaken and much too tough. . . for me."

"Perhaps. We'll see, darling."

Well, the "darling" was welcome, anyhow. Even if their future together was circumscribed.

Robel came striding into the room when they were all having lunch. He'd expected all these old crocks to shiver at his shadow. Instead, they ignored him, passed dishes to one another, conversed calmly. Gibbon had schooled them well.

Robel stood there watching them without a flicker of expression. Martin was uneasily aware of his regard, but like the others he pretended Robel wasn't there.

"Who's the cook?" demanded Robel of the company at large.

He might have been speaking in a vacuum. No one seemed to hear a sound.

Robel gripped Gross by his thin shoulder. The hairy hand tightened until beads of sweat broke on Gross's brow.

"Who's the cook?"

"I am," said Gross, quietly.

"Then cook lunch for me at once. None of this wishy-washy salad stuff. I want a steak. Bring it to me in my room. And coffee."

"What about your blondes?" said someone. "Can't they cook? I thought Nazis could do everything."

Robel let it pass. "I'll expect to see you in a half-hour," he said to Gross, and turned away.

"Mr. Gibbon, where did you put that cyanide?" said Gross, in a stage whisper.

"I'll get it for you," said Gibbon, gravely.

Robel stopped in his tracks. He turned deliberately. His

gaze went from Gross to Gibbon and back again, as if he were judging how far they were serious. It was plain that the possibility of being poisoned hadn't occurred to him before. Then he said: "Never mind, Gross, I'll do it myself."

A subdued titter ran round the table. Robel looked at them. A faint flush crept above his collar.

He said grimly: "Just remember this, the lot of you. You are alive on sufferance. You have food at all only because I allow it. You won't feel like laughing when you come to the end of the food—in a month, on your present rations. It won't worry me—I shan't be here. But it'll worry you."

He left abruptly.

Gibbon stood up. "Thank you, gentlemen. We're beginning to bother him a little. It's the thin end of the wedge. Even the most self-sufficient man feels unsure of himself when the rest gang up on him. From the Doctor's remarks, I presume he imagines that he's going to be able to leave us here. That's the next thing for us to work on."

But the next thing Gibbon got to work on was Martin's asthma. He asked Martin to visit him privately in his room. Martin went along the same evening. Gibbon was standing by the window looking out over the restless upper surface of the Red-deth to the horizon which appeared so near on this small planet. Phobos moved in the west, a black ball against the sunset. The pinpoint of Deimos showed faintly in the dulling sky.

"Good evening," said Martin.

The old man turned. He looked very frail, but his master purpose gave him a certain strength.

"Hello, Martin. Monica has told me you wish to marry her."

Martin coughed wheezily. "Do you mind if I sit down? . . . Thank you. Yes, it's true, and I was going to see you about it. Though it seems most unlikely that a ceremony could be performed now. I'm afraid our chance has gone."

Gibbon frowned. "You seem to take two things for granted. First, that Monica would marry you, and second, that I should agree to it. Now, I understand that Monica has already told you that she won't marry you—"

"That was only because she didn't want to spoil my chances of returning to Earth," broke in Martin. "It wouldn't have made any difference then, and the point doesn't arise now. I'm sorry

you don't seem very keen about the marriage. May I know what the objection is?"

"Certainly—you can have it straight from the shoulder. I shouldn't ever want a coward for a son-in-law."

Martin went pale. He got up, very rigidly. "That. . . seems to settle it."

"Sit down, Martin, and never mind the offended dignity," said Gibbon. "It's not wholly your fault, and it can be mended. The thing is, do you admit it?"

Martin stood there a moment, then sank slowly back into his chair. "I've never claimed to be a hero. Perhaps I have used my asthma as an excuse—"

"Good, good. That's half the battle won. You've got the courage to admit your lack of courage, which sounds like a pretty paradox but it isn't: it means you *have* courage."

"A little moral courage, maybe, but physical courage is quite a different thing."

"No, it isn't. Courage is courage. It's merely a matter of application. The next thing is, are you willing to let me hypnotize you?"

"Why?" asked Martin.

"I told you once before that asthma is a nervous complaint. It arises from a psychological block. You play the child and the weakling, unconsciously creating your asthma symptoms as an excuse for not facing up to life. You're dodging responsibility. Why? You don't know why yourself. Neither do I. But if we can discover the reason together, you've a good chance of clearing that emotional block, of freeing yourself from that wretched child. You can become a man, and even though your life may be short, you'll have achieved the object of living, which is simply to attain maturity—you won't die a failure. Isn't it worth trying? Both for your sake and Monica's?"

"I'll do anything you ask."

"Good. Now relax. Go utterly limp. Let your eyelids droop. These wrists are too stiff. . . Let your fingers droop. Too much tenseness in the shoulders—sag. Sag like a sack of potatoes. . . You're tired. Your eyelids are as heavy as lead. You're very tired. . ."

Martin awakened with a start. Someone had snapped their fingers. Hazily, he knew that that was the signal to awake. It was dark now and a million stars spangled the coal-black curtain beyond the window. The bedside lamp was shaded with a maga-

zine. In the subdued glow Gibbon sat in the opposite chair and watched him thoughtfully.

"Did I say anything? Was—"

"You said plenty," said Gibbon. "In fact, enough to show us the root of the trouble. You never knew your father, did you?"

"No. He died a month after I was born. He was a life-long invalid."

"So your whole early life was dominated by your mother—and from what you've revealed, she was a very domineering person indeed. And she not only kept her grip on you while she was alive—she still retains it. Habits of thought, especially those inculcated in one in infancy, are the very devil to break. I don't know by what quirk of character your mother needed to have a male utterly and completely dependent on her, but she had that need. I suspect she had insufficient sexual attraction to satisfy it, so she was driven to use naked power. When your father died, you became the substitute."

"But she loved me. She did everything for me."

"Did you love her?"

Martin struggled for words. "I—I—" His voice died out.

"You want to say yes, because you think you ought to. Actually, you feared and hated her because she crushed your self-expression. You told me so—under hypnosis. Anyway, the upshot was a sub-conscious mental conflict leading to a guilt complex. You felt guilty because you thought you should love your mother, because she was a superior being devoting her life to your care and attention, and actually you knew that you hated her. Yet you sensed that she liked you to be dependent on her, and to atone for your guilt you provided the required symptoms of sickness. Don't you realize now that she never really wanted you to be cured?"

Martin said, falteringly: "I'm—I'm in a daze. I suppose—She usually seemed in a hurry to take me away from any place that appeared to be doing me good."

"This was one place she never got away from herself. For certain kinds of heart disease this sanatorium is ideal. The heart muscle has only a third of the weight of blood to push around. On the other hand, it tends to quicken its beat, and too rapid a pulsation in some cases can be fatal. It was so in your mother's. She died. You remained alive—still with your guilt complex, which was strengthened."

"You mean—I felt I was responsible for her death by bringing her here?"

"Yes. But you must understand this: she brought *you* here—it wasn't the other way about. Your asthma has never gone because you thought she intended you to stay here, and so you supplied the reason why you should. My counter-suggestion is that she'd undoubtedly have whisked you back to Earth on the next Monthly had she lived to see it. I may as well point out to you now that you'd never have returned to Earth in two years or twenty years—in fact, never until this psychological tangle of yours had been straightened out. You'd still have looked wistfully at Earth thinking it was withheld from you—when no one was keeping you here but yourself. Frightened to leave your mother or to displease your image of her."

"Surely that's ridiculous? She's dead—"

"Yes. And buried. *Here*. But her image isn't dead. I'll tell you something else. Because you were brought up to be entirely dependent on another person, that attitude became a habit with you, second nature. You needed that superior being—you were scared to stand on your own feet, you wouldn't grow up. That mental image you carried gradually became identified with Robel."

"But I hate Robel!"

"Do you remember a certain moment overlooking Niagra? You hated your mother then so much that you had an impulse to push her to her death."

"No, no, that's not true. I admit. . . I hoped she'd fall. But—"

"You repressed the impulse. It's still in your sub-conscious, festering, the pivot of your guilt complex. . . Would you kill Robel?"

Martin began to fight for air again. He gasped, plucking at his collar.

"I expected those symptoms," said Gibbon, regarding him both with sympathy and a clinical interest. "They occurred the other evening as soon as we talked about killing Robel. Same cause, same effects. You confuse the thought of killing Robel with the thought of killing your mother. Same guilt complex."

Nevertheless, Gibbon knew the symptoms were real enough to the victim and were not to be dispersed by a mere revelation of their cause. Habits of thought can only be overcome by new habits of thought, and suggestion eradicated only by counter-

suggestion. There would have to be many hypnotic sessions—it was a race against time.

Gently, he did what he could to ease Martin's physical torment.

Chapter V

Robel was showing himself more rarely these days.

He would not have admitted to himself that he needed the respect of other men, but basically it was one of his greatest needs. He'd always had it here in the sanatorium, but only while he'd worn a mask. When he'd stripped off that mask and shown the real strong man it had concealed, he'd imagined these chronic invalids would be overcome with awe, tremble at his approach, become his prey as he amused himself playing upon their fears.

As it was, they were beginning to play upon his fears.

And they regarded him as ludicrous, an atavism. They mocked him with their eyes and often with their tongues. Surprisingly, little Gross seemed to be the ring-leader of this campaign of derision. The others got their strength from Gross—and old Gibbon.

One day he'd strolled over to the usual foursome in the lounge: Gibbon and his daughter, Gross and Martin.

"Here comes Atavistic Adolf the Anachronism," murmured Gross loudly enough for him to hear, as he'd been intended to hear. He grabbed Gross by the throat.

"Another crack like that and I'll kill you."

"It'd . . . save me . . . a long wait," choked Gross. "Thanks."

Robel growled deep in his throat, and shoved him aside. He glowered down at the others. They exchanged amused glances. Robel knew he was adopting the wrong tactics: any loss of self-control before these people was loss of face. He strove to regain something of his professional calm.

He said: "You know, I've been trying to imagine what use you people could be in the scheme of things, and I've failed. If you were healthy enough, I could take you back to Earth with me and use you as guinea pigs in a line of medical research I'm going to resume. Under the New Nazi regime I'd be allowed to do that, of course. I was frustrated while the humanitarians had control. The inevitable trial and error phase of my experiments would by the nature of it kill some of my human guinea pigs. The humanitarians rated it as murder, which is ridiculous: murder

is killing by intent and with vindictiveness. The Nazis, you know, never let such scruples stand in the way of medical research. That's why I became, philosophically, a Nazi. They didn't deserve the vilification they received. They were merely practical men."

"They were sick men," said Gibbon. "And so are you. Don't underrate my usefulness—I could do a lot for your mind, if you admitted error and were willing to co-operate."

"I wonder why senility and presumptuousness seem to run in double harness?" said Robel. "Never mind. You're all scraped. There'll be a lot of scrap-heaps when I get back to Earth. Preserving the unfit is both illogical and genetically harmful. You can understand that I've not been too happy here having to waste my life running around after the Earth's rejects. Indeed, it was fast becoming an unbearable frustration. The revolution couldn't have come a moment too soon for me."

"It's a pity Hitler's body was never found," mused Monica. "These types of Teutonic mystics were bound to create the Hitler Legend. Siegfried & Wagner, Inc., just won't shut down business—they think there's still a demand for tin swords and home-made, fire-breathing dragons."

As the only one who'd not spoken, Martin felt he must play his part. He gabbled, before he could think about it: "I had a fire-breathing dragon when I was a kid, but one day it breathed in instead of out, and went up in flames."

"Did you collect the insurance?" asked Gross, still rubbing his throat cautiously.

"No, I was in hospital," said Martin. He dared not meet Robel's eyes, but he could feel their piercing regard, none-the-less. He anticipated a storm of anger directed at him.

"So. The Breathless Baby is turning comedian too," was all Robel said. "Well, if you'll excuse me, I'll just leave you all to rot."

"Just a moment," said Gibbon. "You really think you're going back to Earth, don't you?"

"Naturally. On the next Monthly. It'll come especially for me. This place has been written off, I can tell you that."

"How do you know you're not written off with it?" asked Gibbon.

"You don't understand the loyalty of our kind. . . I'm known to be a loyal Nazi."

"Yes, of course, and very useful to them when they were trying to gain control of Earth. Now they've gained their objective, you

say. They've won. They don't need your assistance any longer, which means they don't need you. They're practical men, as you say, not humanitarians. Do you really think they'll equip and send a full-size space-ship, with crew, forty million miles just to pick up one quite unimportant man?"

"Certainly?"

"Surely they'd have communicated with you by radio before this, and let you know?"

"When a Nazi destroys a radio station, he destroys a radio station," said Robel. "There's no half-heartedness about it. That station just isn't there any more."

"And as far as they're concerned, you're just not here any more," said Gibbon.

"I can see that there's only one thing that'll convince you," said Robel. "That's to see the Monthly when it comes. I promised you that I'll ensure you do that. I'll have you come with me to welcome it."

He left them. Any time he went near them after that, his reception was much the same. They tried to draw him out and torment him. They smiled at him behind their hands. He became uneasy and there were horrible times of doubt.

Schmidt and Farben—they *would* remember his proposed research? And his good work for the Party in the past? . . . Of course, Farben was a bit self-centered, and rather good at banging the drum of sacrifice for the cause, so long as he wasn't the sacrifice. But Schmidt would think of him. They'd been good friends. He wished now that he hadn't made that attack in the *Lancet* on Schmidt's work. He'd only been trying to straighten the fellow out on a few misconceptions. . . . Oh, what was he worrying about?—the Party would never let him down.

Sometimes he tried to talk to the nurses. They'd been brought up on Party lines, believing that the woman's place was in the home, her sole function being the bearing of children, and having neither intelligent opinions nor any interest in her own appearance.

In short, the nurses were unbeautiful and dumb. They drove him in despair to the invalids. And then the invalids would drive him away again, in something very near to despair also.

He was not a very happy man these days.

. . . .

The usual quartet were in their usual corner of the lounge.

Monica was staring up into the deep blue sky.

"It's not due for another fifteen minutes," said Martin. "That's if it keeps to its original schedule, but there's no reason why it should now, if it comes at all."

"Do you think it'll come, father?" asked Monica, still searching.

"I just don't know dear. Your guess is as good as mine." The old man plucked Martin's sleeve, crooked a finger. Martin bent to listen. It was a whisper. "I've a feeling we're getting near the final trial of strength, Martin. You've had nearly a score of sittings now—I've done my utmost. Do you think. . . you've got on top of it now?"

Martin was still hesitant, and Gibbon noted it unhappily.

"I can't say. Physically, I feel fine. I'll—I'll try my best."

Gibbon sighed. "All right, my boy. Perhaps we can fit some more treatment in yet."

Gross gave a soft whistle. "Here's Siegfried again. I never feel less funny than when that pig's near me—he scares me sick. When I think of poor old Harris. . ." Out loud, he sang: "I'm Nobody's Baby. . ."

Robel was trying to appear calm, but it was obvious that he was excited and pleased. There was something of his old geniality about him.

"There's no need to strain your very nice eyes, Miss Gibbon. The Monthly's on its way, and it'll be here on time. I've been observing it from the old telescope room. Now, you know we've always had a welcoming committee here—Gross and Martin are two of the oldest members. I promised that you could all come this time, so if you would kindly—"

"Not this time, thanks," said Martin, shortly.

Robel slipped out his electric pistol. His half-smile turned into a frown.

"If you stay here, you'll stay here a corpse. Come on, the four of you."

Gross said: "Well, if you put it like that, how can we refuse?"

Martin looked doubtfully at Gibbon. The old man shrugged, and levered himself out of his chair. "We'd better go."

The elevator took them to the roof. The cobalt blue sky was as blank as the wide, white roof itself. The only sound was the hissing and high-pitched grinding of the Reddeth, millions of stone particles clashing in an interminable civil war. Through

the red swirl the ruled line of the Martian city showed more clearly than usual—it was being uncovered.

Monica looked upwards. "I still don't see it."

"It was only a piece of dirt on the telescope lens," said Gross. "The observatory hasn't been dusted for years."

Robel looked at him grimly. "I'm warning you, Gross. I've had more than enough of your feeble humor. Keep quiet."

Gibbon was watching Robel keenly, weighing his state of tension. "You're probably right, Gross," he said, deliberately. "It was either that or spots before the eyes. It's a well-known psychological fact that if you desire to see something desperately enough, you'll persuade your eyes that they're seeing it, in time. I'm willing to wager that the Doctor's view of the Monthly was purely subjective."

"You'll see, you'll see," snapped Robel. His normally deep voice cracked on an absurdly falsetto note. The long persistent playing on his nerves was reaching its culminating effect. Doubt was insinuating itself more and more. The man was on edge. He peered anxiously up at the expected quarter of the sky, straining to see what he longed to see.

Martin became aware that both Gross and Gibbon were watching him, as if they felt they'd reached the limit in their efforts and were asking him to make some move now, to use his strength. But his body and mind seemed frozen. He dragged his gaze round to the oblivious Robel, and the electric pistol seemed to swell like a balloon before his eyes.

He saw again Harris's contorted face, the ghastly needle that opened radial splinters, like the ribs of an umbrella, in the organ it penetrated and all the time discharged its searing, high-tension current into you. He was paralyzed with terror.

His testing time had come, and he was failing.

Gross saw the gaze fixed on the gun, and understood, because he too was afraid. He licked his lips, took a deep breath, and said: "Do you remember that old tale of flying saucers? They—"

There was a click, and Gross's uncertain smile twisted, became a grimace of unbearable agony. He staggered sideways, turning his head, showing the dread disk on his temple. Then he collapsed and was still.

"That was one crack too many," said Robel. His lips were drawn back, his eyes were wild, and his fingers clenched the oval butt of the gun as though they were straining to squeeze it flat.

All at once a terrible feeling of insecurity permeated Martin.

It was as though the bottom had dropped out of everything, as though all his relationship with solid matter had been stripped from him.

The sky was no longer a sort of cozy lid, but an utter emptiness stretching away on all sides for millions of miles below as well as above, for the roof and the sanatorium and Mars itself under him seemed less substantial than a soap bubble, filmy stuff that might at any moment let him fall through into the illimitable gulf of the night sky at the underside of the planet.

He was a small ball of fear in a tremendous vacuum.

All references were gone, everything was meaningless.

Gross, who'd been so alive and real a moment ago, was suddenly a small, shrunken husk, a dried and brittle leaf afloat in nothingness. The spark of life was dying in old Gibbon and in another moment he, too, would be the same: dead forgotten, pointless. Robel, whom he'd thought such a tremendous symbol of evil, was a silly little flurry of misdirected energy, spinning itself into waste. Monica was beautiful as a snowflake is beautiful melting away swiftly in the sunlight: a transient pattern no more tangible than a memory.

Only himself was real, a hard lump of flesh coalescent under the constricting force of fear, a solitary amoeba contracting upon itself in a topless and bottomless ocean. There was nothing—anywhere—to hold on to. All his life had been a bad dream, and it had dissolved away.

Then he saw it. Out of the void something materialized: a tiny white, circular spot. It grew bigger.

Then in a flash he knew what it was. The Monthly was returning, the one link with Earth. Earth, his cradle and his home, still existed. The wonder of the Grand Canyon, the imperial Rockies, the swarming ways and soaring towers of New York were all there, awaiting him.

So was Niagra, its torrential waters foaming towards the sublime leap. He saw it vividly in his mind's eye, and the thunder of the falls grew around him, a vibrating roar. The power and drive of it possessed him. It was Life itself, and now some of its tremendous energy was beginning to flow through him. It was as though his shoulders were broadening, his chest expanding his muscles tensing and flexing with a new-born strength. The voice of the falls sang a paean through his head, ever louder and triumphant. If only he could live like this forever!

A vain hope. There was always that black forbidding figure

interposing itself between him and life. It would take him away from that life-force, return him to his weak, gasping misery and dependence.

And suddenly fierce rebellion blazed through him like the fiery blast from a furnace. All inhibitions snapped like rotten strings.

He shouted incoherent hate and hurled himself madly at the figure. He thrust hard with both fists, a tremendous double punch. The figure went flying backwards, grasping wildly at air. But it was already over the brink and it fell down into the whirlpool. Still it fought there, under the surface. He could see it. But it was dying. The water was reddening about it as it struggled.

And suddenly the water was all red—and no longer water.

His vision cleared as his passion ebbed. He saw reality now, and the shock of it sickened him.

Because he'd fallen three times as slowly as on Earth, Robel had survived the fall from the roof. It would have been better for him if he had not. He reeled blindly about, his head inadequately shielded by his arms, the sport of the furious winds, dying the death of a thousand cuts. The sharp flying knives of stone sliced his clothes from him impatiently, and the winds whirled the shreds away.

Then they began on his white body, which soon was not white, and then was not a body.

Robel met the "Red Death" without witnesses because nobody could bear to look.

The thunder of the falls had continued throughout, though resolving itself into the roaring jets of the Monthly braking its fall towards its usual landing point.

When they looked, it had landed.

They stood in silence and watched the flap open near the nose, and the shining autogyro emerged onto the platform. When it began fluttering towards them, Monica moved alongside Martin and sought his hand. He gripped her palm tightly, so tightly that she winced. His strength had not ebbed with his illusions. He was not afraid of the autogyro, he was not afraid of anything any more. He would come out fighting.

The autogyro dipped and then dropped gently beside them. The pilot got out. He smiled cheerfully.

"Hello there. Everybody okay? I guess you've been wondering all this time what happened. Sorry we couldn't contact

you. A few lunatics blew a chunk out of the beam station. Repairs should be finished in a couple of days, and you'll be getting your power direct again. Hope the emergency hook-up worked okay. Shame you had to miss the TV programmes—they've had some good stuff on. Guess it must have been kind of dull here without them."

"Oh, no, we've managed to keep ourselves amused," said Gibbon, dryly. "Those lunatics you mention were Nazis, weren't they?"

"I think so—'fraid I didn't take all that interest, though one of the rocket crew was mixed up in it. Guy named Mannheim—didn't know him. Anyway, there was only a handful of 'em all told, and they're all in the nut-house now."

"There's three more down below you can take back with you," said Martin. "Females."

"Well, what do you know?" said the pilot. "Must be contagious. I suppose Dr. Robel's down there with 'em?"

Gibbon shook his head, and gestured towards the heaving Reddeth.

"Uh?" said the pilot, startled. He peered in the indicated direction, and frowned. "I don't see anything."

"There's nothing left to see," said Gibbon.

"You'll marry me?" asked Martin.

"But you're cured now, you're a healthy man, you can return to Earth—"

"There's no question of that. I want to stay here with you. Simply, because I love you and couldn't leave you."

"But what'll you *do* here?"

"I'm enormously interested in these Martian cities. That link outside is opening up now. I want to start excavating and exploring—it's a gigantic treasure house that'll occupy us all our days."

"I'll come with you."

"So long as you leave the heavy work to me. . ."

He was never sure if Gibbon knew that Robel had been over-set by nothing more than the blind fury of a child. But it didn't matter now—all that was in the past, where it belonged.

On the shoulders of Gibbon and the real hero, Gross, he'd mounted to manhood. He was big enough now to toss away the ticket back to Earth, for which he'd once imagined he'd give his soul. Paradise is where you find it—even in Limbo.

WILLIAM F. TEMPLE

Mr. UDELL

Who could tell what his child would look like? After all, he was a Science Fiction Fan!

Illustrated by Jack Wilson

Chapter I

HE STOPPED at the reception desk in the foyer and coughed to attract the clerk's attention. She recognised a frequent visitor and smiled at him, disclosing small, pearly teeth.

"Not long to wait now, Mr. Udell, I'm glad that we were able to reach you at the Plant, after all, it is a great day for you. Just wait in the first room on the left side down the corridor. You'll find some magazines there, and I'll send someone in to you as soon as I hear any news." She turned back to the switch-board and picked up the receiver.

"Thank you." Mr. Udell turned away and followed her instructions, pausing at the door and looking up and down the corridor as he entered.

The waiting room was tastefully decorated with pale green tiles, reaching from the carpeted floor to the large, clear, crystal windows that ran along three sides of the room. A plastic topped table with gleaming metal legs occupied the centre of the floor, and comfortable rest chairs were so placed round the room that each one overlooked the colourful scenery visible beyond the windows.

Mr. Udell walked over to a chair, thankful that he was the only one there, and placed the pile of parcels that he carried on the

table top by its side. Casually he picked up a bunch of papers and magazines and leafed through them, relaxing and letting his head sink into the cushions padding the back of his chair.

Suddenly his eyes lit up with a gleam of interest as he paused at a certain magazine and critically inspected the cover. Without thinking he put the rest of the reading material back on the table and turned to the contents page of the one that he still held.

"Umm," he murmured. "Now I wonder how I missed this one?" He turned back to the cover and peered at the date just beneath the name, 'SPACE TALES.' "Oh yes, that was the week I was out of town. Good, I never expected to find anything like that here."

For some five minutes or so there was no sound from him except for his heavy breathing. The pages were swiftly flicked over as he became more and more engrossed in the lead story.

The sound of footsteps along the corridor brought him back to reality. His breathing became harsh and rapid and his stomach muscles tightened up into a hard, compact knot. The person passed the door and continued down the passage. Mr. Udell closed the book with a sigh of relief and brushed his handkerchief over his brow. It came away damp with perspiration and he was conscious of a sickly feeling welling up in his throat. Looking down at the magazine lying in his lap, he stood up and let it fall to the floor. He gave it a savage kick and watched it bounce back from the green tiles and fall to the carpet, cover torn and pages crumpled.

This was the sort of stuff that caused him to have all these misgivings. Ever since his wife became pregnant he'd had these little prickings of fear and yet he couldn't resist reading, no matter how hard he tried to give it up, he always came back to his old love — Science Fiction.

Out came a thick, green cigar, he pierced the end with a pointed finger nail and stuck it in the corner of his mouth. He struck a light and puffed the cigar into life, savouring the aromatic fumes that rose in clouds about his face before dispersing about the room. The sickly feeling came back and, without further thought, he ground the glowing tip against the tiles. An instant later he realised what he had done, and swiftly brushed the scattered ash and bits of tobacco beneath the heating pipes set close to the wall.

His nerves were all cut to pieces, his tongue and throat sore

and dry from continual smoking. His eyes felt heavy with sleep but he knew that if he closed them, even for an instant, shutting out the normal sights, horrors would swarm before him. Things would mock and sneer at him, they would reach out and try to draw him to them. Figments of the imagination, but deadly real to one in his condition.

They had warned him often enough, his wife and his relations, ever since that day he had picked up a magazine from the corner bookstall and found that he enjoyed it. From then on, he couldn't get enough of them, he haunted the book shops for back copies, wrote letters to the Readers Columns requesting issues that he had missed, and gradually his collection grew until he was hard put to find storage space for it.

He shivered, why! oh why hadn't he listened to the friendly advice that had been offered him. Now it was too late. . . .

But here he had a slight thread of hope to which he quickly grasped and clung. Maybe it would be all right after all and his worrying come to nothing. He stilled his icy trembling and thought as calmly as possible under the circumstances his brain trying to analyse his fears and come down to hard, basic facts.

Ten years it had been—ten long, but, he must confess enjoyable years. Had he, in that time, delved too deeply into the mysteries and horrors that crowded the majority of his reading? They had told him that he would end up in a lunatic asylum if he carried on as he was doing, but he had laughed at their fears, he had even tried writing such stories and had some small amount of success. Yes, he had been supremely confident that he was strong of mind and that no ill effect would come to him, but now the moment must be drawing close and his heart sank as he thought of what the outcome could be.

If auto-suggestion really worked, then he might as well abandon all hope right now, for the reading contained many imaginative and often startlingly clear descriptions of what other races in the universe could look like. All of which his fertile mind had eagerly absorbed. And yet his child might not look *too* bad, perhaps if there was only a *slight* amount of difference nobody would notice. But what if it turned out to be like something he feared? He could never feed it even though it would be of his own flesh and blood, and he was sure that his wife could not bring herself to do it. Just to think, they might even have to lock it away where no prying eyes could see it.

The neighbours though! They would be sure to ask what the new baby looked like, and why he and his wife never took their child into the parks and along the garden-walks. What answer would he have to that? None, as far as he could see.

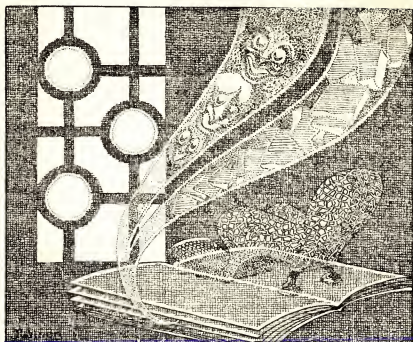
Nobody likes to confess that their child is a freak, but to have to say that it was a monster — ugh! The mere thought turned his stomach again, bringing tears to his eyes at the same time — tears of self-pity that something like this might happen to him.

His wife now, she would be sure to bear hatred for him; after all it was his doing; she probably wouldn't even be able to bring herself to speak to him — let alone share their home together once more — How could he explain to his friends why his wife had left him? He couldn't say that she'd left him for somebody else. His pride would not let him say that, and yet he couldn't tell them the truth, that he, their well liked friend and neighbour, had fathered a monster!

It could look like any one of the thousands of strange beings that he had read and written about. Things which seemed real and even feasible in a story setting, but in reality they would be enough to drive ordinary parents stark raving mad. He could picture it attempting to climb upon his knee for the love that all babies should have lavished upon them, and then the dread of repulsing it because it wasn't like other normal children. Too alien to care for and yet the tearing of heart strings as it looked up at him with puzzled eyes, wondering if it had done anything wrong that it should be so spurned.

He gasped for breath as the phantoms of his mind ran away with him, casting him back into the realms of fantasy, into the stories within his books, complete with countless possibilities and variations. With difficulty he banished the creatures that his readings had created for him. His face was a ghastly shade of dirty grey as he deliberated upon what past years of fantasy and science fiction reading had done to him during these last few, short months.

He'd lose his job if he kept on like this. Surely his chief at the atomic plant must have noticed his peculiarities, his strange lapses and mumbled ramblings, especially since his wife had entered hospital. But he'd had to keep everything to himself. Little did they know his fears, little did his wife suspect his secret thoughts. He'd taken great care not to let her see that he was



worried, more so when visiting time came round now that she was away from home. They had talked about common-place things and he'd kept his eyes averted from the swelling beneath the hospital sheets of her bed. This he did in case his fretful fear overcame his reticence to tell her, and he blurted out his mind's wanderings in an unguarded moment.

Strange though, that she had never asked him why he didn't mention their coming child. Maybe she did have an idea of what he was thinking. Maybe she was of the same opinion and was scared to say so, but then she was hard headed and it probably hadn't struck her that way. Men are strange creatures, and at times they erect a protective shell about their true feelings, hiding what they would like to blurt out, trying not to appear over-excited or anxious. To her, this would be the most obvious reason for his silence.

Mr. Udell groped his way out of the easy-chair which now threatened to smother him and stood unsteadily, looking about him. He felt sick and decided that a walk might clear his head and settle the nausea that kept rising in his stomach.

Twenty-five paces back and forward across the waiting room. He counted them again and again, trying to concentrate on the numbers in an endeavour to relax his mind and think clearly once more.

"My, but it's hot in here," he murmured. Walking over to the windows, he reached out and pulled down one of the catches, the window swung open letting in a cool, fresh breeze. Udell stood there for a moment or two, drinking in the wine-like air and looking out over the parklands and lakes. He could see people walking about beneath him, enjoying themselves, without a care in the world.

How he wished that he could join them, forget everything, live his life again and start along a new path that would lead him out of his misery.

He turned away with a sigh, knowing that it could not be, that whatever happened now he must face it. There was no going back; no evading the issue!

Again footsteps sounded along the corridor. His heart stood still as the person stopped outside the waiting room doors. Was this the bearer of the news he had been waiting for, and dreading? Would he be able to face them?

"Brace yourself," he whispered, endeavouring to compose his trembling body. "There is nothing to worry about; everything will be all right. There are thousands of births every day and your child is just one of them."

One of them! One of them! How he hoped that it was.

"Steady now, steady. They are coming in. Smile! Yes, that's what I must do. Smile! Ah! that's better."

Why is the nurse backing in? What is she afraid of? Why doesn't she turn round? Oh yes, the door, she doesn't want it to swing back on her whilst she has her arms full.

"What is it nurse, a boy or a girl? Why are you looking at me like that? What's wrong—what's wrong I say? Why don't you tell me?"

She moved back, alarmed as he started towards her, his face contorted with the anguish and fear that was burning strongly within him.

A sudden lunge and he had hold of her by the shoulders. Then a sharp peer down at the bundle she held in her arms. His eyes were bulging and his breath rasped in his throat.

Without warning he let go of her and fell to the floor, laugh-

ing and sobbing at the same time—tearing the carpet, his body shaking and helpless with the racking force of his screams.

The nurse stood there, shocked, unable to move. The child in her arms, his child, started to cry and, from beneath a loosely wrapped blanket, snaked out a long thin tentacle with claw-like hooks at the tip.

Finally the nurse forced herself into motion. She turned and fled, his cries following her out of the room as she rushed down the corridor. Two internes passed her at a run, pushed aside the doors and seized Udell until his spasm abated.

He straightened his back and blinked the tears from his large, round eyes, then quietly, he let them lead him out of the waiting room, along a corridor and into an open yard at the rear of the hospital.

Softly, he spoke to himself: "It's normal, normal! Mine, and it is alright, the same as any other child." A tired smile lit his face.

There he stood, the heat from the twin suns warming his purple body — a proud and happy father.

D. S. GARDNER

. . . .

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ENIGMA

*Out of space or time it came
— to find only death*

I HAVE two hands, but I cannot feel, nor can I use them in the accepted sense of the word. I have two eyes, but I cannot see that which others tell me exists. My two feet cannot be used for any form of locomotion, nor does my nose convey to me any of the many odours which, I am told, surround me. What smell is I have yet to discover, for it has for me no meaning. I have a body yet I am not aware that it functions in any way. I have, so they say, all the normal organs perfectly adapted to perform their recognised functions. Last, and certainly not least, I have a brain. . . .

This last possession has its curiosities, for it contains no recollection of how I happen to be in this strange new world. Nor can I discover where I have come from. The voices inform me that I was found floundering about in a forest clearing, my condition reminding them of a fish out of water. What they mean by "forest" or "fish" I cannot say.

In fact, everything about this place called Earth strikes me as strange and unreal. Those who speak to me would have me believe that they are not disembodied voices, but real live beings, not unlike myself, and that they live in what they call "buildings," and that their world is divided into what they call separate countries, the people speaking different languages. All, it seems, have achieved a high level of civilization, although the peoples are much given to fighting amongst themselves. Why, nobody has yet satisfactorily explained.

They assure me that I possess a very high degree of intelligence, and that I have mastered their language in a miraculously short time. For reasons which I cannot understand they lay great emphasis on this "time" dividing it and sub-dividing it, so

that they seem to be burdened with seconds, minutes, hours, and many other measurements of time.

They have asked me countless questions about myself. I have not been able to answer one of their queries, for the simple reason that I cannot, strive as I might, recall my origin or the place from whence I came. Nor can I remember how it came about that I left that forgotten world. In my strange and unexpected surroundings the inhabitants of Earth are constantly probing me touching me, watching me, examining me, facts which I sense rather than feel.

In spite of the oxygen they give me, I am still greatly troubled with my breathing. There is a great weight pressing down on me all the time. They are worried because I don't eat anything, but I have yet to experience what they describe as "hunger." They say that I will die unless I take some form of nourishment, but that, again, means nothing to me. They talk of something which they call "death," an experience which is shunned. Evidently death means either a deep sleep, or adventuring into another world, but nobody seems to be certain. Only one thing they do know, and that is that this "death," means that they have completely finished with this world.

I sometimes reach out towards them, and although they say my hand touches their person, I cannot feel the contact, nor see what I am supposed to be touching. On the other hand, I appear to see things which are invisible to them. I perceive peculiarly shaped, variously coloured gaseous clouds, which shrink and swell with some rhythmic inner motion, countless balls of fire, large and small, which roll about occasionally, shrivelling me with their intense heat. These are elongated, wriggling, transparent entities that cavort about alarmingly.

They are exceedingly amazed to hear this, and tell me that I must be equipped with a sense of perception which they do not possess. Naturally they have advanced many theories as to my sudden appearance on their Earth. Some will have it that I was borne to earth on some meteor, while others are equally convinced that I was engaged on some Four Dimensional experiments and accidentally translated myself from the place of my origin. There are others who advance the equally fantastic theory that I was washed up by the sea, whatever that is, and that my natural environment is water of great depth. This last idea is

rejected, I understand, because I was discovered many "miles" from the sea, although what that has to do with it I cannot imagine.

I am in no position to offer any opinion on the matter. My mind is an absolute blank as far as the past is concerned. I try ceaselessly to think back, but, all that comes to me is a vague, troubled longing. . . .

If only I could move, and escape from this "room," no part of which is visible to me. But the great weight pressing down on me prevents me from moving so much as a finger. A great lassitude creeps over me at times, and I find myself longing for that experience called "death" which my companions here resist with all their strength.

The voices keep urging me to partake of countless different foods, which mean nothing to me. They mean well, these unseen hosts of mine, but there are times when I find myself wishing that they would leave me alone. It seems that they are concerned because I am slowly but surely starving to death. They urge me to eat, warning that I am wasting away. . . . You must live, they insist. Above all, you must live.

They do not understand. For why should I live? Merely to adapt myself to their world? I cannot feel that it is worth the effort. They seem to cling to a strange system which is based on struggle, distrust, greed and false doctrines. . . .

No, I have no wish to live. More and more, I grow eager to experience this "death". . . . It may be that is the experience in which I shall find the answer to everything. . . .

MICHAEL HERVEY

. . . .

The Beautiful Woman

She could have become beautiful, like everyone else on that perfect planet — but she didn't want to!

Illustrated by Gerard Quinn

Chapter I

MARY SAT QUIETLY and watched the handsome man's legs blown off, watched on further as the great ship began to crumple and break into small pieces in the middle of the blazing night. She fidgeted slightly as the men and the parts of the men came floating dreamily through the wreckage out into the awful silence. And when the meteorite shower came upon the men, flying in gouging holes through everything, tearing flesh and ripping bones, Mary closed her eyes.

"Mother."

Mrs. Cuberle glanced up from her magazine.

"Hmm?"

"Do we have to wait much longer?"

"I don't think so, Why?"

Mary said nothing but looked at the moving wall.

"Oh, that," Mrs. Cuberle laughed and shook her head.

"That tired old thing. Read a magazine, Mary, like I'm doing. We've all seen *that* a million times."

"Does it have to be on, Mother?"

"Well, nobody seems to be watching. I don't think the doctor would mind if I switched it off."

Mrs. Cuberle rose from the couch and walked to the wall. She depressed a little button and the life went from the wall, flickering and glowing.

Mary opened her eyes.

"Honestly," Mrs. Cuberle said to the woman beside her,

"you'd think they'd try to get something else. We might all as well go to the museum and watch the first landing on Mars. The Mayorka Disaster—really!"

The woman replied without distracting her eyes from the magazine page. "It's the doctor's idea. Psychological."

Mrs. Cuberle opened her mouth and moved her head up and down, knowingly.

"Oh. I should have known there was *some* reason. Still, who watches it?"

"The children do. Makes them think, makes them grateful or something."

"Oh. Of course yes."

"Psychological."

Mary picked up a magazine and leafed through the pages. All photographs, of women and men. Women like Mother and like the others in the room; slender, tanned, shapely, beautiful women; and men with large muscles and shiny hair. Women and men, all looking alike, all perfect and beautiful. She folded the magazine and wondered how to answer the questions that would be asked.

"Mother—"

"Gracious, what is it now! Can't you sit still for a minute?"

"But we've been here three hours."

Mrs. Cuberle sniffed.

"Do—do I really have to?"

"Now don't be silly, Mary. After those terrible things you told me, of *course* you do."

An olive-skinned woman in a transparent white uniform came into the reception room.

"Cuberle. Mrs. Zena Cuberle?"

"Yes."

"Doctor will see you now."

Mrs. Cuberle took Mary's hand and they walked behind the nurse down a long corridor.

A man who seemed in his middle twenties looked up from a desk. He smiled and gestured towards two adjoining chairs.

"Well, well."

"Doctor Hortel, I—"

The doctor snapped his fingers.

"Of course, I know. Your daughter. Ha ha, well well, I

certainly do know your trouble. Get so many of them nowadays, takes up most of my time."

"You do?" asked Mrs. Cuberle. "Frankly, it had begun to to upset me."

"Upset? Hmm. Not good at all. Ah, but then—if people did not get upset, then we psychiatrists would be out of a job, eh? Go the way of the M.D. But I assure you, I need hear no more."

He turned his handsome face to Mary. Little girl, how old are you?"

"Eighteen, sir."

"Oh, a real bit of impatience. It's just about time, of course. What might your name be?"

"Mary."

"Charming! and so unusual. Well, now, Mary, may I say that I understand your problem—understand it thoroughly."

Mrs. Cuberle smiled and smoothed the metalwork on her jerkin.

"Madam, you have no idea how many there are these days. Some times it preys on their minds so that it affects them physically, even mentally. Makes them act strange, say peculiar, unexpected things. One little girl I recall was so distraught she did nothing but brood all day long. Can you imagine!"

"That's what Mary does. When she finally told me, Doctor, I thought she had gone—you know."

"That bad, eh? Afraid we'll have to start a re-education programme, very soon, or they'll all be like this. I believe I'll suggest it to the Senator day after tomorrow."

"I don't quite understand, doctor."

"Simply, Mrs. Cuberle, that the children have got to be thoroughly instructed. Thoroughly. Too much is taken for granted and childish minds somehow refuse to accept things without definite reason. Children have become far too intellectual, which, as I trust I needn't remind you, is a dangerous thing."

"Yes, but what has this to do with—"

"Mary, like half the sixteen, seventeen and eighteen year olds today, has begun to feel acutely self-conscious. She feels that her body has developed sufficiently for the Transformation—which of course it has not, not quite yet—and she cannot understand the complex reasons which compel her to wait until some vague, though specific, date. Mary looks at you, at the women all about her, at the pictures, and then she looks into a mirror. From pure perfection of body, face, limbs, pigmentation, car-

riage, stance, from simon-pure perfection, if I may be allowed the expression, she sees herself and is horrified. Isn't that so, my dear child? Of course, of course. She asks herself. 'Why must I be hideous, unbalanced, oversize, undersize, full of revolting skin eruption, badly schemed organic arrangements; in short, Mary is tired of being a monster and is overly anxious to achieve what almost everyone else has already achieved.'

"But—" said Mrs. Cuberle.

"This much you understand, doubtless. Now, Mary, what you object to is that our society offers you, and the others like you, no convincing logic on the side of waiting until nineteen. It is all taken for granted and you want to know why! It is that simple. A non-technical explanation will not suffice, mercy no. The modern child wants facts, solid technical data, to satisfy her every question. And that, as you can both see, will take a good deal of reorganizing."

"But—" said Mary.

"The child is upset, nervous, tense; she acts strange, peculiar, odd, worries you and makes herself ill because it is beyond our meagre powers to put it across. I tell you, what we need is a whole new basis for learning. And, that will take doing. It will take *doing*, Mrs. Cuberle. Now, don't you worry about Mary, and don't you worry, child. I'll prescribe some pills and—"

"No, no, doctor! You're all mixed up," cried Mrs. Cuberle.

"I *beg* your pardon, Madam?"

"What I mean is, you've got it wrong. Tell him, Mary, tell the doctor what you told me."

Mary shifted uneasily in the chair.

"It's that—I don't want it."

The doctor's well-proportioned jaw dropped.

"Would you please repeat that?"

"I said, I don't want the Transformation."

"But that's impossible! I have never heard of such a thing. Little girl, you are playing a joke."

Mary nodded negatively.

"See, doctor. What can it be?" Mrs. Cuberle rose and began to pace.

The doctor clucked his tongue and took from a small cupboard a black box covered with buttons and dials and wire. He affixed black handles to Mary's head.

"Oh no, you don't think—I mean, could it?"

"We shall soon see." The doctor revolved a number of

dials and studied the single bulb in the centre of the box. It did not flicker. He removed the handles.

"Dear me," the doctor said. "Your daughter is perfectly sane, Mrs. Cuberle."

"Well, then what is it?"

"Perhaps she is lying. We haven't completely eliminated that factor as yet; it slips into certain organisms."

More tests. More machines and more negative results.

Mary pushed her foot in a circle on the floor. When the doctor put his hands to her shoulders, she looked up pleasantly.

"Little girl," said the handsome man, "do you actually mean to tell us that you *prefer* that body?"

"I like it. It's—hard to explain, but it's me and that's what I like. Not the looks, maybe, but the *me*."

"You can look in the mirror and see yourself, then look at—well, at your mother and be content?"

"Yes, sir." Mary thought of her reasons; fuzzy, vague, but very definitely there. Maybe she had said the reason. No. Only a part of it.

"Mrs. Cuberle," the doctor said, "I suggest that your husband have a long talk with Mary."

"My husband is dead. That affair near Ganymede, I believe. Something like that."

"Oh, splendid. Rocket man, eh? Very interesting organisms. Something always seems to happen to rocket men, in one way or another."

The doctor scratched his cheek. "When did she first start talking this way," he said.

"Oh, for quite some time. I used to think it was because she was such a baby. But lately, the time getting so close and all, I thought I'd better see you."

"Of course, yes, very wise, Er, does she also do odd things?"

"Well, I found her on the second level one night. She was lying on the floor, and when I asked her what she was doing, she said she was trying to sleep."

Mary flinched. She was sorry, in a way, that Mother had found that out.

"Er—did you say 'sleep'?"

"That's right."

"Now where could she have picked that up?"

"No idea."

"Mary, don't you know nobody sleeps anymore. That we have an infinitely greater life-span than our poor ancestors now that that wasteful state of unconsciousness has been conquered? Child, have you actually *slept*? No one knows how anymore."

"No sir, but I almost did."

The doctor breathed a long stream of air from his mouth.

"But, how could you begin to try to do something people have forgotten entirely about?"

"The way it was described in the book, it sounded nice, that's all."

"Book, book? Are there *books* at your Unit, Madam?"

"There could be I haven't cleaned up in a while."

"That is certainly peculiar. I haven't seen a book for years. Not since '17."

Mary began to fidget and stare nervously.

"But with the Tapes, why should you try to read books. . . Where did you get them?"

"Daddy did. He got them from his father and so did Grandpa. He said they're better than the Tapes and he was right."

Mrs. Cuberle flushed.

"My husband was a little strange, Doctor Hortel. He kept these things despite anything I said. Finally hid them, as I see."

The muscular black-haired doctor walked to another cabinet and selected from the shelf a bottle. From the bottle he took two large pills and swallowed these.

"Sleep. . . books. . . doesn't want the Transformation . . . Mrs. Cuberle, my *dear* good woman, this is grave. I would appreciate it if you would change psychiatrists. I am very busy and, ah, this is somewhat specialized. I suggest Centraldome. Many fine doctors there. Goodbye."

The doctor turned and sat in a large chair and folded his hands. Mary watched him and wondered why the simple statements should have so changed things. But the doctor did not move from the chair.

"Well!" said Mrs. Cuberle and walked quickly from the room.

Mary considered the reflection in the mirrored wall. She sat on the floor and looked at different angles of herself: profile, full-face, full-length, naked, clothed. Then she took up the magazine and studied it. She sighed.

"Mirror, Mirror on the wall. . ." The words came halt-

ingly to her mind and from her lips. She hadn't read these she recalled. Daddy had said them, quoted them as he put it. But they too were lines from a book. . . "who is the fairest of—"

A picture of Mother sat upon the dresser and Mary considered this now. Looked for a long time at the slender feminine neck, knotted in just the right places. The golden skin, smooth and without blemish, without wrinkles and without age. The dark brown eyes and the thin tapers of eyebrows, the long black lashes. Set evenly, so that each half of the face corresponded precisely. The half-hearted mouth, a violet tint against the gold, the white, teeth, even, sparkling.

Mother, Beautiful, Transformed Mother. And back again to the mirror.

"—of them all. . ."

The image of a rather chubby young woman, without lines of rhythm or grace, without perfection. Splotchy skin full of little holes, puffs in the cheeks, red eruptions on the forehead. Perspiration, shapeless hair flowing onto shapeless shoulders down a shapeless body. Like all of them, before the Transformation. . .

Did they *all* look like this, before? Did Mother, even?

Mary thought hard, trying to sort out exactly what Daddy and Grandpa had said, why they said the Transformation was a bad thing, and why she believed and agreed with them so strongly. It made little sense, but they were right. They *were* right! And one day, she would understand completely.

Mrs. Cuberle slammed the door angrily and Mary jumped to her feet.

"Honestly, expenses aren't so high that you have to leave all the windows off. I went through the whole level and there isn't a single window left on. Don't you even want to see the people?"

"No. I was thinking."

"Well, it's got to stop. It's simply got to stop. Mary, what in the world has gotten into you lately?"

"I—"

"The way you upset Doctor Hortel. He won't even see me anymore, and these traumas are getting horrible — *not* to mention the migraines. I'll have to get that awful Doctor Wagoner."

Mrs. Cuberle sat on the couch and crossed her legs carefully.

"And what in the world were you doing on the floor?"

"Trying to sleep."

"You've got to stop talking that way! Why should you want to do such a silly thing?"

"The books."

"And you mustn't read those terrible things."

"Mother—"

"The Unit is full of Tapes, full! Anything you want!"

Mary stuck out her lower lip. "But I don't want to hear all about wars and colonizations and politics!"

"Now I know where you got this idiotic notion that you don't want the Transformation. Of course. Well, we'll see to that!"

Mrs. Cuberle rose quickly and took the books from the corner and from the closet and piled her arms with them. She looked everywhere in the room and gathered the old brittle volumes.

These she carried from the room and threw into the elevator. A button guided the doors shut.

"I thought you'd do that," Mary said, slowly, "that's why I hid most of the good ones. Where you'll never find them!" She breathed heavily and her heart thumped.

Mrs. Cuberle put a satin handkerchief to her eyes and proceeded to weep.

"I don't know what I ever did to deserve this!"

"Deserve *what*, Mother? What am I doing that's so wrong?" Mary's mind rippled in a little confused stream now.

"What?" Mrs. Cuberle screamed, "*What*? Do you think I want people to point at you and say I'm the mother of a mutant?" Her voice softened abruptly into a plea. "Or have you changed your mind, dear?"

"No." The vague reasons, longing to be put into words.

"It really doesn't hurt, you know. They just take off a little skin and put some on and give you pills and electronic treatment and things like that. It doesn't take more than a week."

"No." The reasons.

"Look at your friend Shala, she's getting her Transformation next month. And *she's* almost pretty now."

"Mother, I don't care—"

"If it's the bones you're worried about, well that doesn't hurt. They give you a shot and when you wake up, everything's moulded right. Everything, to suit the personality."

"I don't care, I don't care."

"But *why*?"



"I like me the way I am." Almost, almost exactly. But not quite. Part of it, though; part of what Daddy and Grandpa must have meant.

Mrs. Cuberle switched on a window and then switched it off again. She sobbed.

"But you're so ugly, dear! Like Doctor Hortel said. And Mr. Willmes, at the factory. He told some people he thought you were the ugliest girl he'd ever seen. Says he'll be thankful when you have your Transformation."

"Daddy said I was beautiful."

"Well really, dear. You *do* have eyes."

"Daddy said that real beauty is more than skin deep. He said a lot of things like that and when I read the books I felt the same way. I guess I don't want to look like everybody else, that's all." No, that's not it. Not at all it.

. . . .

"You'll notice that your father had *his* Transformation, though!"

Mary stamped her foot angrily.

"He told me that if he had to do it again he just wouldn't. He said I should be stronger than he was."

"You're not going to get away with this, young lady. After all, I *am* your mother."

A bulb flickered in the bathroom and Mrs. Cuberle walked uncertainly to the cabinet. She took out a little cardboard box.

"Time for lunch."

Mary nodded. That was another thing the books talked about, which the Tapes did not. Lunch seemed to be something special long ago, or at least different. . . . The books talked of strange ways of putting a load of things into the mouth and chewing these things. Enjoying them, somehow. Strange and wonderful.

"And you'd better get ready for work."

Mary let the greenish capsule slide down her throat.

"Yes, Mother."

The office was quiet and without shadows. The walls gave off a steady luminescence, distributing the light evenly upon all the desks and tables. And it was neither hot nor cold.

Mary held the ruler firmly and allowed the pen to travel down the metal edge effortlessly. The new black lines were small and accurate. She tipped her head, compared the notes beside her to the plan she was working on. She noticed the beautiful people looking at her more furtively than before, and she wondered about this as she made her lines.

A tall man rose from his desk in the rear of the office and walked down the aisle to Mary's table. He surveyed her work, allowing his eyes to travel cautiously from her face to the draft.

Mary looked around.

"Nice job," said the man.

"Thank you, Mr. Willmes."

"Dralich shouldn't have anything to complain about. That crane should hold the whole damn city."

"It's very good alloy, sir."

"Yeah. Say, kid, you got a minute?"

"Yes sir."

"Let's go into Mullinson's office."

The big handsome man led the way into a small cubbyhole of a room. He motioned to a chair and sat on the edge of one desk.

"Kid, I never was one to beat around the bush. Somebody called in a little while ago, gave me some crazy story about you not wanting your Transformation."

Mary looked away, then quickly back into the man's eyes.

"It's not a crazy story, Mr. Willmes," she said. "It's true. I want to stay this way."

The man stared, then coughed embarrassedly.

"What the hell—excuse me, kid, but—I don't exactly get it. You ain't a mutant, I know that. And you ain't—"

"Insane? No; Doctor Hortel can tell you."

The man laughed, nervously. "Well. . . Look, you're still a cub, but you do swell work. Lots of good results, lots of comments from the stations. But Mr. Poole won't like it."

"I know. I know what you mean, Mr. Willmes. But nothing can change my mind."

"You'll get old before you're half through life!"

Yes, she would. Old, like the Elders, wrinkled and brittle, unable to move correctly. Old.

"It's hard to make you understand. But I don't see why it should make any difference, as long as I do my work."

"Now don't go getting me wrong, kid. It ain't me. But you know, I don't run Interplan. I just work here. Mr. Poole, he likes things running smooth and it's my job to carry it out. And as soon as everybody finds out, things wouldn't run smooth. There'll be a big to-do, y'understand? The dames will start asking questions and talk. Be the same as a mutant in the office—no offence."

"Will you accept my resignation then, Mr. Willmes?"

"Sure you won't change your mind?"

"No sir. I decided that a long time ago."

"Well then, I'm sorry, Mary. Couple ten, twenty years you could be centralized on one of the asteroids, the way you been working out. But. . . if you should change your mind, there'll always be a job for you here. Otherwise, you got till March. And between you and me, I hope by then you've decided the other way."

Mary walked back down the aisle, past the rows of desks. Past the men and women. The handsome model men and the beautiful, perfect women, perfect, all perfect, all looking alike. Looking exactly alike.

She sat down again and took up her ruler and pen.

. . . .

Mary stepped into the elevator and descended several hundred feet. At the Second Level she pressed a button and the elevator stopped. The doors opened with another button and the doors to her Unit with still another.

Mrs. Cuberle sat on the floor by the TV, disconsolate and

red-eyed. Her blonde hair had come slightly askew and a few strands hung over her forehead

"You don't need to tell me. No one will hire you."

Mary sat down beside her mother.

"If only you hadn't told Mr. Willmes in the first place—"

"Well, I thought *he* could beat a little sense into you."

The sounds from the TV grew louder. Mrs. Cuberle changed channels a number of times and finally turned it off.

"What did you do today, Mother?" Mary smiled.

"What *can* I do now? Nobody will even come over! Everyone thinks you're a mutant."

"Mother!"

"They say you should be in the Circuses."

Mary went into another room. Mrs. Cuberle followed, wringing her well-groomed hands, and crying: "Mutant, mutant! How are we going to live? Where does the money come from now? Next thing they'll be firing *me*!"

"No one would do that."

"Nobody else on this planet has ever refused the Transformation. The mutants all wish they could have it. And you, given everything, you turn it down. You *want* to be ugly!"

Mary put her arms about her mother's shoulders.

"I wish I could explain; I've tried so hard to. It isn't that I want to bother anyone, or that Daddy or Grandpa wanted me to."

Mrs. Cuberle reached into the pocket of her jerkin and retrieved a purple pill. She swallowed the pill.

When the letter dropped from the chute, Mrs. Cuberle ran to snatch it up. She read it once silently, then smiled.

"Oh," she said, "I was so afraid they wouldn't answer. But we'll see about this *now*!"

She gave the letter to Mary, who read:

Mrs. Zena Cuberle

Unit 451-D

Levels II & III

City

Dear Madam:

In re your letter of Dec. 3 36. We have carefully examined your complaint and consider that it requires stringent measures of some sort. Quite frankly, the possibility of such a complaint has never occurred to this Dept. and we therefore cannot issue positive directives at this present moment.

However, due to the unusual qualities of the matter, we have arranged an audience at Centraldome 8th Level 16th Unit, Jan. 3 37, 23 sharp. Dr. Elph Hortel has been instructed to attend. You will bring the subject in question.

Yrs,

DEPT. F

Mary let the paper flutter to the floor. She walked quietly to the elevator and set it for Level III. When the elevator stopped, she ran from it, crying, into her room.

She thought and remembered and tried to sort out and put together. Daddy had said it, Grandpa had, the books did. Yes. the books did.

She read until her eyes burned and her eyes burned until she could read no more. Then Mary went to sleep, softly and without realizing it.

But the sleep was not a peaceful one.

. . . .

"Ladies and gentlemen," said the young-looking, classic-featured man, "this problem does not resolve easily. Doctor Hortel here, testifies that Mary Cuberle is definitely not insane. Doctors Monagh, Prynn and Fedders all verify this judgement. Doctor Prynn asserts that the human organism is no longer so constructed as to create and sustain such an attitude as deliberate falsehood. Further, there is positively nothing in the structure of Mary Cuberle which might suggest difficulties in Transformation. There is qualified evidence for all these statements. And yet—" the man sighed "—while the Newstapes, the Foto services, while every news carrying agency has circulated this problem throughout the universe, we are faced with this refusal. Further, the notoriety has become excessive to the point of vulgarity and has resultantly caused numerous persons, among them Mrs. Zena Cuberle, the child's mother, grievous emotional stress. What, may I ask, is to be done therefore?"

Mary looked at a metal table.

"We have been in session far too long, holding up far too many other pressing contingencies of a serious nature. The trouble on Mercury, for example: We'll *have* to straighten that out, somehow!"

Throughout the rows of beautiful people, the mumbling increased. Mrs. Cuberle sat nervously tapping her foot and running a comb through her hair.

"The world waits," continued the man. "Mary Cuberle,

you have been given innumerable chances to reconsider, you know."

Mary said, "I know. But I don't want to."

The beautiful people looked at Mary and laughed. Some shook their heads.

The man in the robes threw up his hands.

"Little girl, can you realize what an issue you have caused? The unrest, the wasted time? Do you fully understand what you have done? We could send you to a Mutant Colony, I suppose you know. . ."

"How could you do that?" inquired Mary.

"Well, I'm sure we could—it's a pretty point. Intergalactic questions hang fire while you sit there saying the same thing over and over. And in judicial procedure I dare say there is some clause which forbids that. Come now, doesn't the happiness of your dear mother mean anything to you? Or your duty to the State, to the entire Solar System?"

A slender, supple woman in a back row stood and cried, loudly: "We want action. *Do something!*"

The man on the high stool raised his arm.

"None of that, now. We must conform, even though the problem is out of the ordinary."

The woman sat down, snorted; the man turned again to Mary.

"Child, I have here a petition, signed by two thousand individuals and representing all the Stations of the Earth. They have been made aware of all the facts and have submitted the petition voluntarily. It's all so unusual and I'd hoped we wouldn't have to—but, well, the petition urges drastic measures."

The mumbling rose.

"The petition urges that you shall, upon final refusal, be forced by law to accept the Transformation. And that an act of legislature shall make this universal and binding in the future."

Mary's eyes were open, wide; she stood and paused before speaking.

"*Why?*" she asked.

The man in the robes passed a hand through his hair.

Another voice from the crowd: "Seems to be a lot of questions unanswered here."

And another: "Sign the petition, Senator!"

All the voices: "Sign it! Sign it!"

"But *why?*" Mary began to cry. The voices stilled for a moment.

"Because—Because—What if others should get the same idea? What would happen to us then, little girl? We'd be right back to the ugly, thin, fat, unhealthy-looking race we were ages ago! There can't be any exceptions."

"Maybe they didn't consider themselves so ugly!"

The mumbling began anew and broke into a wild clamour.

"That isn't the point," cried the man in the robes, "you *must* conform!"

And the voices cried: "Yes!" loudly until the man took up a pen and signed the papers on his desk.

Cheers; applause; shouts.

Mrs. Cuberle patted Mary on the top of her head.

"There now!" she said happily, "everything will be all right now. You'll see, Mary, dear."

The Transformation Parlor covered the entire Level, sprawling with its departments. It was always filled and there was nothing to sign and no money to pay and people were always waiting in line.

But today the people stood aside. And there were still more, looking in through doors, TV cameras placed throughout and Tape machines in every corner. It was filled, but not bustling as usual.

The Transformation Parlor was terribly quiet.

Mary walked past the people, Mother and the men in back of her, following. She looked at the people, too, as she did in her room through turned-on windows. It was no different. The people were beautiful, perfect, without a single flaw. Except the young ones, young like herself, seated on couches, looking embarrassed and ashamed and eager.

But, of course, the young ones did not count.

All the beautiful people. All the ugly people, staring out from bodies that were not theirs. Walking on legs that had been made for them, laughing with manufactured voices, gesturing with shaped and fashioned arms.

Mary walked slowly despite the prodding. In her eyes, in *her* eyes, was a mounting confusion; a wide, wide wonderment.

She looked down at her own body, then at the walls which reflected it. Flesh of her flesh, bone of her bone, all hers, made by no person, built by herself or Someone she did not know. . . Uneven kneecaps making two grinning cherubs when they straightened, and the old familiar rubbing together of fat inner thighs. Fat, unshapely, unsystematic Mary. But *Mary*.

Of course. Of course! This *was* what Daddy meant, what Grandpa and the books meant. What *they* would know if they would read the books or hear the words, the good, unreasonable words, the words that signified more, so infinitely much more, than any of this. . .

The understanding heaped up with every step. "Know thyself": so clear.

"Where *are* these people?" Mary said, half to herself. "What has happened to *them* and don't they miss *themselves* these manufactured things?"

She stopped, suddenly.

"Yes! That *is* the reason. They have all forgotten themselves!"

A curvacious woman stepped forward and took Mary's hand. The woman's skin was tinted dark. Chipped and sculptured bone into slender rhythmic lines, electrically created carriage, made, turned out. . .

"All right, young lady. Shall we begin?"

They guided Mary to a large, curved leather seat.

From the top of a long silver pole a machine lowered itself. Tiny bulbs glowed to life and cells began to click. The people stared. Slowly a picture formed upon the screen in the machine. Bulbs directed at Mary, then re-directed into themselves. Wheels turning, buttons ticking.

The picture was completed.

"Would you like to see it?"

Mary closed her eyes, tight.

"It's really very nice." The woman turned to the crowd. "Oh yes, there's a great deal to be salvaged; you'd be surprised. A great deal. We'll keep the nose and I don't believe the elbows will have to be altered at all."

Mrs. Cuberle looked at Mary and grinned.

"Now, it isn't so bad as you thought, is it?" she said.

The beautiful people looked. Cameras turned, Tapes wound.

"You'll have to excuse us now. Only the machines allowed."

Only the machines.

The people filed out, grumbling.

Mary saw the rooms in the mirror. Saw things in the rooms, the faces and bodies that had left, the woman and the machines and the old young men standing about, adjusting, readying.

Then she looked at the picture in the screen.
And screamed.

A woman of medium height stared back at her. A woman with a curved body and thin legs; silver hair, pompadoured, cut short; full sensuous lips, small breasts, flat stomach, unblemished skin.

A strange woman no one had ever seen before.

The nurse began to take off Mary's clothes.

"Geoff," the woman said "come look at this, will you. Not one so bad in years. Amazing that we can keep anything at all."

The handsome man put his hands into his pockets; and clucked his tongue.

"Pretty bad, all right."

"Be still, child, stop, stop making those noises. You know perfectly well nothing is going to hurt."

"But—what will you do with me?"

"That was all explained to you."

"No, no—with *me, me!*"

"Oh, you mean the cast-offs. The usual. I don't know exactly. Somebody takes care of it."

"I want *me!*" Mary cried. "Not that!" She pointed at the image in the screen.

Her chair was wheeled into a semi-dark room. She was naked now, and the men lifted her to a table. The surface was like glass, black filmed. A big machine hung above in shadows.

Straps. Clamps pulling, stretching limbs apart. The screen with the picture brought in. The men and the women, more women now. Doctor Hortel in a corner, sitting with his legs crossed, shaking his head.

Mary began to cry loudly, as hard as she could, above the hum of the mechanical things.

"Shhh. My gracious, such a racket! Just think about your job waiting for you, and all the friends you'll have and how lovely everything will be. No more troubles now."

The big machine groaned and descended from the darkness.

"Where will I find *me?*" Mary screamed. "What will happen to *me?*"

A long needle slid into rough flesh and the beautiful people gathered around the table.

And then they turned on the big machine.

All Men Kill

*He had the primitive desire to be loved
but only a machine could fulfil his need*

THERE were plenty of people in the bright clean streets. Gay, happy people, who walked in pairs or in threes or fours beside the towering sleekness of the buildings, the glitter of the shop windows, the enticement of the Playdomes. People who laughed and smiled as they strolled their brief moment in the mechanical perfection of their Age. And there was Cardus Morgan, who walked alone and who did not smile.

All along the streets on either side, the signs flashed brightly, playing off their colours against each other in ionic pursuit of customers. Cardus Morgan stopped beneath a sign.

S. Claus

WE SUPPLY ANYTHING

Scowling, he walked beneath the sign into the building, away from the hum of the street into the silence of insulated corridors. The scowl faded a little, now that people were three layers of plastic brick away.

A door marked 'Sales' swung open at his approach and he passed through into a neat and efficient room. He strode in with the confidence of the rich, the arrogance of the poor, the belligerence of the in-between. Unasked, he placed himself in a chair before the desk. Subtly, smoothly, the chair changed its shape to coincide with Morgan's. Irritatedly he got up and stood.

The smart young man behind the desk looked up, smiled. The smile lived only a little while.

"Morgan!"

"*Doctor* Morgan, please," Cardus grated.

The young man rose to his feet, then sank slowly back again. "Yes, of course," he said quickly. "*Doctor* Morgan. From Llanwig. You've—you've come a long way—sir. Er—I'm Wilson. Sales Manager."

Morgan jerked his neck. "Farther than you think!" His harsh voice grated through down-drooped lips. "Not only the special distance from Llanwig, but across the spiritual gulf between myself and the rest of mankind. A long way, Mr. Wilson. A long way."

Nervously he blinked, twitched a cheek and began to pace in front of the desk. Wilson looked at him and remembered the things he had heard and read about Cardus Morgan. Not very nice things.

Morgan lived in isolated Llanwig to be away from people. He had no friends. He was ugly, brusque and cruel. Long, spiky hair overfell a sour, lined face. Tufted, meeting eyebrows ran in a straight line above gimlet eyes that saw and remembered only the nastier things in life. His manner was harsh, sharp and insulting. His whole life was devoted to rooting out and exposing the railties, the mistakes, the indiscretions of his fellows. Everything he did brought suffering, ignominy and ruin.

Behind Morgan's name, Wilson knew, was a string of degrees — inherited. Morgan himself knew nothing but the intricacies of law, intricacies that could trap and destroy his virtually innocent victims. But it was not for money he did it. Morgan's talented ancestors had supplied him with all he could use of that. And he used so little.

Perhaps, thought Wilson, watching the tense figure pacing in front of his desk, perhaps there were psychological reasons for Morgan's behaviour. Something to do with his parents' lives, or his poor physique, or his low intelligence for anything but vociferous, spiteful exposures. Or, more likely, Cardus Morgan just happened to be like that, for no reason at all—something to do with Heisenburg's uncertainty principle applied to the combination of genes and the mechanics of chromosome cross-linkage.

Somewhere, back in the line of Morgan's ancestors, a random, unpredictable, non-casual interaction had occurred in the germ-plasm. The result had stunted his growth, distorted the pathways

of his brain; had left no place for most emotions — only the one overpowering force of biting hate. A nucleic acid whimsy.

Cardus Morgan stopped pacing and stared at a wall panel that repeated the flashing sign outside.

S. Claus

WE SUPPLY ANYTHING

He brought his gaze around to Wilson. "That true?" he demanded.

Wilson collected himself, smiled and oozed salesmanship. Cardus Morgan was unpleasant, but he was also rich. A good customer, even if a bad citizen.

"S. Claus organisation is vast and efficient." He pointed a slim, elegant finger at a sign, his voice becoming soft and confidential. "We make that boast confidently. We have been asked to supply many remarkable things—Martian canal water, a complete lunar crater, even—stardust. And we have never failed. Our slogan is literally true. We supply *anything*."

"Good." Morgan's face lost none of its sourness as he listened impatiently to Wilson's eulogy. His face muscles twitched, his fingers flexed, his neck jerked. If it were possible, Wilson thought, Morgan was nervous.

"And you wish us to supply you with something, Doctor Morgan?"

"Two things. The first is secrecy."

"Secrecy, Dr. Morgan?"

Again the neck-jerk, the twitching and the flexing. "The secrecy must shroud the second thing I want."

"I see."

"I'm prepared to pay for it. Treat it as a commodity. Charge for it. I'll pay twenty times the normal fee."

Wilson let his fingers press against the smooth metalastic desk. "Exactly as you want it, Dr. Morgan. Just exactly as you say."

Cardus Morgan grimaced—the Morgan smile. "Money buys everything."

"It can be arranged," Wilson said quickly. "Hypnosis. That will leave only me—which is as good as no one." He laughed forcibly. "And what was the second thing you wanted Dr. Morgan?"

For a second there was hesitation. Then Morgan glared at the Sales Manager.

"Love," he said.

The word hung poised in the cool office air while Wilson came to grips with it in relation to Cardus Morgan.

Love. The greatest misanthrope ever was asking for love. The ultimate embodiment of hate was demanding love. Paying high for it.

Wilson's mind came back to business. "Yes," he said, expressionlessly. "That can be arranged, too. Do you have **any** special preferences? Blonde, tall—"

"Not women," Morgan rasped. "I've tried that." His eyes burned beneath the beetling brows. He spoke fast and breathlessly, as if wanting to get it all out before some psychic barrier clamped down on his tongue and vocal cords.

"It's love I want, not lust. Constant love. Love that's above and beyond sourness and ugliness. Love that can turn on and off at my will. Love from a machine. Tuned to *my* personality!"

He swung away and began his pacing again. Wilson chuckled inside himself; the situation was more piquant than he had thought.

"A love machine," Wilson mused. "I should think we could do that. We have the best robotechnicians. It will take time, of course."

Morgan swung back, leaned on the desk and spoke with terrible urgency.

"Not long. It must not take long!"

. . . .

It was beautiful. Wilson had put his best men onto it. They had worked day and night, bringing a variety of skills to the fashioning of Cardus Morgan's love machine. First, the psychophysicists to determine the electronic patterns that would react to hate with love, that would click away merrily under scorn and insults; a reversal of the pleasure-pain principle. Then, the technicians to assemble the printed circuits, the batteries of valves, the power input and the controls. All of them did their work under amnesic hypnosis.

Built like a console, the love machine extended a pair of

flexible couplings that terminated in a head-cap. A series of buttons on the cabinet's front allowed instant control of the nuances of spiritual love, in tune with Morgan's own personality.

Wilson watched it being lowered from a coaster by hypnotised technicians. He tasted the psychological aspect. It was all there, all clear. He had found it in the books.

Beneath Morgan's front of nastiness there was the primal desire for affection. A little part of his parental chromosomes had escaped the non-casual warp as meiosis and they had passed on to him the strong affective instinct. All his life, Morgan had tried to stifle them, but now it had broken through like a vernalised seed essaying its summer task in winter. But it was too late now to get affection from people. Morgan's personality had taken a too irrevocable step in the wrong direction. Morgan had to get affection from a machine. That was how the books put it.

Wilson followed the technicians into Morgan's austere cold house. The misanthrope was there to meet him, to show him where the machine would stand, to listen absently while Wilson explained the use of the machine. Morgan stared with burning eyes at the love machine. The machine that was tuned to his own personality.

On impulse, Morgan signed the cheque and ushered Wilson from the room. Then he turned to his mechanical lover. He snapped the starter switch, put on the cap that came down over his eyes and blotted out the world of human animosity.

Sensations swept through his mind as he manipulated the controls. Sympathy of the real kind. Understanding of any required degree. And giving. The machine could give; and the giving was unalloyed with material things. It was love of a quiet, enduring kind. Gradually, Morgan's mind began to lose its nastiness. He began to radiate love. . .

Outside, Wilson drove the coaster back towards Claus's and the flashing sign, marvelling at the depth and perception of the psychologists.

And two hours later, the love machine was a tangled mass of smashed equipment under Morgan's loving, grief-stricken eyes.

FREIGHT

From Venus came the priceless rejuvenating serum—in exchange, went hundreds of men and women, never to return

Illustrated by Alan Hunter

Chapter I

HE awoke to the muted drumming of rain and for a moment lay silent, his eyes closed as he tried to recapture the dimming magic of lost dreams. A hand shook his shoulder with impatient urgency, and he sighed, opening his eyes and staring at the anxious expression of a young man.

"Jim, it's raining."

"So what?"

"But the harvest, Jim! You promised to help me."

"Did I?" He yawned and sat up on the fern bed stretching pallid arms and rubbing the stubble on lips and chin. He grinned at the young man, trimly dressed in khaki drill, freshly shaven and with polish still on his knee-boots.

"Won't you take my word for it, Sam?"

"No." Sam bit his lips as he stared at the older man, trying to hide his disgust at the other's nakedness and dirt. He stared beyond the open front of the hut and seemed to tremble with impatience.

"Can't you hurry it up?"

"Why?" Jim paused as he tied the strings of his bark sandals. "I've told you that the harvest won't be ready until the rain stops. We've plenty of time." He rose from the bed and slipped a loin cloth around his slender waist. The only civilised thing about him was a wide leather belt and a ten inch sheath knife, aside from that he looked an ignoble savage, a white man gone native, a beachcomber.

He was none of these things.

He was a native of Earth, an ex-business man, a scholar.

He was a one-way passenger on the road to hell, and he didn't like it one little bit.

He smiled at the trimly dressed figure standing in the open doorway of the rude hut, and stooping down lifted an earthenware jug. He sniffed at it, tasted a little, then took a long swig. He sighed, wiping his mouth and chin.

"Breakfast?"

"No." Sam shuddered at the sight of the jug. "How you can bear to drink that stuff I can't imagine." He stepped closer to the other man. "Why don't you cut it out, Jim? Try and remain decent, give up this filth and squalor? There's a fortune to be got for the asking on Venus and you're satisfied to sit here and drink that filth."

"Am I?" Jim gently put down the almost empty jug. "Do you think that I like it here? I've been on Venus for a long time now, five years I think it is, and I've seen it all. Wait until you've been here as long as that. Wait until your nice neat clothing has rotted off your body, until your razor rusts into useless metal, and your spirits reach the bottom. Wait until then, and perhaps you won't be so ready with your damn patronising sneers!"

"I'm sorry, Jim," apologised the young man, "but this is important to me, more important than you know. I've got to gather a good harvest."

"Why?" Jim stared at the young man, then shrugged. "Haven't they told you yet?"

"Who?"

"The old-timers hanging around the space port. The early arrivals, the eternally hopeful." He stared at the trembling young man. "No. No I can see they haven't," he laughed curtly and crossed the room to stand beside the young man. "You can't really blame them I suppose, they don't get much fun."

"What should they have told me?"

"The truth! The simple deadly truth." He stared at the neatly dressed young man at his side and frowned in sudden suspicion. "I can't believe it," he whispered. "They must have told you, you must have heard."

"No. I only arrived three days ago remember, and I came straight to you, the factor advised it."

"He would," Jim said bitterly, and stared at the rain.

Rain!

It rained as it always rained on Venus. A thundering down-pour streaming from sullen clouds piled across the dome of

the sky. A deluge, churning the rich black loam into a sea of mud pitted with a million brief craters. It drummed on the wide yellow-green leaves of the fern trees, collecting in little pools between the great boles and sending odd-shaped insects burrowing deep for shelter.

It filled the thick air with a fine mist shielding the rude huts of woven leaves and lending a false air of romance to the half-seen shacks of the settlement.

Rain, the curse of the planet, and the curse of men.

Jim stared at it, his lips tight and his eyes bitter, feeling the relentless drumming of the heavy drops echoing of the rhythm of a dirge. He strained his eyes, almost making out the high wire fence around the spaceport, the sturdy log-built huts of the trading post and the spidery radio antenna of the landing beacon. Something else loomed indistinctly through the mist.

A slender pillar of gleaming metal, wide-finned, needle pointed, rearing towards the hidden stars as if impatient to blast the soggy soil of Venus beneath the searing fire of its exhaust. A spaceship!

He twisted his lips as he saw it.

"Ready?" Sam stared impatiently at the older man and touched his bare arm. "Look! It has almost stopped."

"We've time yet," said Jim quietly. He slipped the knife from its sheath and honed it against the leather of his belt testing the edge against the ball of his thumb. Satisfied he replaced it within the sheath, picked up two bags of woven reeds and squinted at the sky.

"Wait until the rain stops and the ground mist starts. The buttons grow terrifically fast, and we must gather them before they get too big. Don't cut any smaller than an inch in diameter or over an inch and a half. Shear the stalk close to the cap, and put them straight in the bags, don't let them touch the mud they will rot if you do and spoil the harvest."

He stood waiting patiently as the last few drops splattered on the mud and the clouds thinned letting the sun glow like a great patch of gold in the heavens. A mist began to rise from the sodden loam, a curtain of water vapour sucked from the dirt and streaming upwards through the humid air.

"Ready?"

Sam nodded, his eyes searching the ground at his feet, the knife glittering in his hand, Jim smiled, remembering his own first enthusiasm, then stepped forward with the easy skill of long practice his knife and bag ready in his hands.

The buttons grew unimaginably fast, sprouting from tiny pin-heads to great swollen globes more than a foot across within a matter of minutes. They were something like mushrooms, deathly white and glimmering against the rich black loam like flakes of snow or the delicate blooms of magnolias. Jim moved his arms in practised rhythm, the keen blade searing through the tough stalks severing the button from the root beds beneath the ground. Cut, place in bag. Cut, place in bag. On and on, knife glittering as he worked with smooth efficiency. He hardly moved from where he crouched, the buttons grew so thickly that it wasn't necessary, and when he finally straightened the bag was full.

He smiled down at the labouring figure of the young man, wiping the blade of his knife against his naked thigh.

"That's all for now, Sam," he called. "They are too big, the factor won't accept them." He grinned at the disappointed expression on the young man's face. "There'll be rain tomorrow, you can gather some more then."

"How many did you get?"

"A bag full, about thirty pounds." He held them out to the sweating, khaki-dressed youngster. "Here."

"You're giving them to me?" Sam wiped his pale face and stared incredulously. "Do you mean it?"

"Sure, I can always get more." Jim shrugged carelessly as he passed over the bag. "You'll learn, son. They haven't the value you think."

"Are you crazy?" Sam looked doubtfully at the gathered harvest. "You know what these are worth on Earth?"

"I know," said Jim soberly, "but remember, Sam. We're not on Earth."

"What's that got to do with it, they're still valuable aren't they?"

Jim shrugged, staring bitterly through the clearing ground mist towards the soaring beauty of the grounded ship.

. . . .

The factor was a big sweaty man dressed in a pair of khaki shorts, sandals, a holstered pistol and nothing else. He grinned as he saw what the young man carried, and rubbed his hands on his sagging paunch with secret humour. He winked at Jim.

"A good harvest, boys," he chuckled. "Ready to trade?"

"Trade?" Sam stared at him with quiet dignity. "I don't want to trade." He swung the bag of buttons onto the rough counter. "Just weigh and credit me with the value of these please."

"Certainly." The factor spilled the white globes of the buttons on the counter examining them with a practised eye. "Good crop," he said. "Did you gather them, Jim?"

"Some."

"I thought so, it takes practice to guess the correct size. Some of these new arrivals won't believe me when I tell them the regulation size. Less than an inch and the oil hasn't formed. Over an inch and a half and they won't stand the shock of take-off, but I can always trust an old hand." He chuckled as he swept the snowy buttons into a nylon bag and hung them on a spring balance. "Thirty two pounds, a good harvest. What will you take?"

"I told you that I'm not interested in trade. Just credit me with their value."

The factor shrugged. "Please yourself, now let me see." He pursed his lips. "Thirty two pounds, that would be about three twenty, say three fifty." He grinned. "Three and a half dollars."

"What?"

"You heard me, I'm offering three and a half International Dollars, ten cents a pound plus a little extra." He took a file from a shelf beneath the counter. "You want it credited you say? Right. What name?"

"You dirty thief!" Sam glared at the fat man his hands twitching into fists. "What do you think you're playing at? I know the worth of these buttons, they fetch more than a hundred dollars a pound on Earth and you offer me ten cents. I won't take it!"

"Please yourself." The factor spilled them from the bag back onto the counter. "Three and a half dollars would have bought a packet of cigarettes, a pack of razor blades, a bar of soap, but you don't have to deal with me."

"What option have I got?"

"None," admitted the fat man cheerfully. "You deal with me, or you don't deal at all."

The young man stared at the little heap of buttons then at the factor. He breathed jerkily, little spots of red glowing angrily high on his sallow cheeks, and his hands made little clenching motions. He turned to Jim.

"Is that right?"

"Yes." Jim straightened himself from where he leaned against the rough logs of the trading post. "Better take what he offers."



"Ten cents a pound! Are *you* crazy?"

"No."

"But it's robbery, sheer robbery."

"No." Jim sighed as he stared at the young man, remembering his own disillusionment. He forced himself to be patient. "What did you expect to get for them?"

"I don't know," said the young man wildly, "but not this, not a thousandth of their real worth. What kind of trade do you call this?"

"Fair trade." Jim shrugged as he rolled some of the hard buttons beneath his hand. "Max isn't cheating you, he's giving you more than they are worth, I advise you to take it."

"I can't," whispered the young man sickly. "I can't!"

He stared desperately at the big factor, his thin features working with hidden emotion. Abruptly he burst into hysterical tears.

Chapter II

It was upsetting, shocking in its very unexpectedness and in a vague kind of fashion it was slightly indecent. Men didn't act like that. Men—real men that is—just didn't burst into hysterical sobbing for no apparent reason. The factor swallowed, his big face red with embarrassment and looked helplessly at Jim.

"Got a drink, Max?" Jim didn't trouble to hide his contempt. He shook the young man by the shoulder. "Snap out of it! What are you, a man or a pansy?"

He waited for an answer his pallid features hardening with disgust. Deliberately he swung his open hand, slapping savagely at the other's convulsed features. The sound of flesh striking flesh echoed above the sobbing, and slowly the hysteria died away. Max grunted and lifted an earthenware jug from beneath the counter.

"Have a drink, lad," he invited kindly. "You'll feel better soon."

"Thanks." Unsteadily Sam lifted the jug and gulped at the contents. He coughed, retched a little, and set the jug down his mouth twisted as from some horrible taste. Jim grinned and reached for the container.

"You make vile liquor, Max. Wait till I get my worm and I'll show you how to make a real drink." He tilted the jug and sighed contentedly as he wiped his lips and chin. "How much longer must I wait for it?"

"I don't know," snapped the fat man irritably. "These things take time, and don't call me Max, that isn't my name."

"You're a Factor aren't you," Jim said cheerfully, "what else do you expect to be called?" He nodded towards the pile of gleaming buttons. "As our young friend here doesn't seem to want what you offer, credit them to me. I may want to buy a tablet of soap one day."

"No!" Sam leaned protectingly across the little heap. "They're mine!"

"Then trade them in," snapped Jim. "We can't hang about here all day?"

"Why not?" The fat man pursed thick lips as he opened his book. "What else have you got to do, and I can use the company." He poised a stub of pencil. "What name shall I credit them to?"

"You're not having them!" The young man seemed on the verge of hysteria again as he glared at the factor. "I won't be robbed! I won't!"

"What the devil?" Angrily the fat man snapped shut his book and thrust at the pile of buttons. They rolled from the counter, bouncing a little as they struck the dirt floor. "I don't like the way you talk, I'm no thief. Now get out of here, and take them with you."

"Not until you give me what they're worth."

"That's exactly nothing. Now get out!" He stared at the young man, then stepped back one hand dropping towards his pistol. "Don't try it," he warned. "Jim! Tell him to drop his knife."

"Drop it!" Jim moved with a gleam of white skin as he caught the young man's arm. He twisted, and Sam cried out in sudden pain the knife falling from his numb fingers. Jim stooped and picked up the gleaming weapon.

"What's the matter with you?" He stared at the tense face of the khaki-dressed youth. "I told you that you'd have to learn, can't you take it?"

"You don't understand," whispered Sam brokenly. "I depended on selling the buttons, I relied on it." He stared at them his eyes huge and dark in the whiteness of his features.

"It is the only way I can ever go back home."

Jim laughed with sudden cruelty.

He stared at the dumb misery in the young man's eyes and laughed again, hating himself for what he did, and yet finding a perverse pleasure in causing pain. It wasn't an amused laugh,

it was bitter, bitter with the rankling bitterness of more than five years of hopeless longing, and it wasn't nice to hear.

The factor looked at him suspiciously, half-drawing his pistol from its holster, and the sight sobered Jim into silence. He gulped, fighting the desire to hurt and pain, and when he spoke his voice was calm.

"You too?" he said quietly. "Haven't they learned the truth back home yet? Did you really expect to make a quick fortune on Venus?"

"Yes," The young man flushed as he met the other's contemptuous stare. "Why not? The buttons are fetching as high as a hundred dollars a pound on Earth, and you can pick them up here as easily as pebbles on a beach. It seemed logical to suppose that money could be made by gathering the harvest and selling it to agents on Earth. Why not?"

"Why not?" Jim smiled tiredly as he echoed the question. He had heard it so often, repeated with varying degrees of emotion by so many people, and still they hadn't learned. He seated himself on the edge of the counter and reached for the jug.

"You made the same mistake as I did, as too many people have done. You confused selling price with buying price, supply with demand. What you say is true, the buttons are worth a hundred dollars a pound—on Earth. But we're not on Earth." He lifted the jug and gulped at the home brewed beer.

"On Venus the buttons are worth nothing, they grow too plentifully, anyone can get as many as they want for a few minutes work a day. On Earth they are valuable because they are scarce, but here they are as you say—like pebbles on a beach. Tell me, Sam, how much would you pay for pebbles back home?"

"Why. . . ?" The young man flushed as understanding came, but he still clung to his dogged convictions. They had brought him from Earth, and they represented too many golden dreams to be thrown aside without a struggle.

"I can see what you are driving at, but it isn't the same. The buttons are wanted back home. People are willing to pay almost anything for the longevity serum, and that means that they will always want more and more buttons. They just can't get enough, and so they must have some value even here."

"They have," said Jim drily. "Ten cents a pound. The actual cost of the labour needed to harvest them." He stared pityingly at the young man. "What else can you expect? What would you pay if you could gather them as easily as pebbles?"

"So it was too good to be true," muttered Sam. "Mary had doubts about it, but I wouldn't listen." He sighed and stared at the factor. "How soon can I get passage back home?"

"That depends." Max stared at the young man, then averted his eyes. "Can you pay?"

"I have some money back on Earth, Mary will pay it into the company office." He sneered as he looked at the fat man. "I suppose that you will trust me for that?"

"I don't enter into it at all," protested the factor. "I can't give you passage until head office sends permission, but that won't take long." He scuffed his sandal on the pounded dirt of the floor. A letter will cost you five dollars. If you hurry I can send it off on the ship, they're due to blast within minutes."

"Thanks for nothing," snapped the young man. He fumbled in his pocket. "I didn't really think that you'd trust me, but it doesn't matter. I've already paid my fare, here!" He threw a crumpled receipt onto the counter. "I want to get home as soon as possible, you had better hold up the ship."

Slowly the fat man picked up the paper and examined the official seal. He held it before his eyes, staring at the watermark and squinting at the punched holes signifying the amount and date. Regretfully he shook his head.

"Sorry, but this won't get you home."

"What!" Angrily the young man snatched at the paper. "It's genuine, you can see that it's genuine! What are you talking about?"

"That is a receipt for two thousand dollars, the price of a passage from Earth to Venus." The fat man shrugged as he met Sam's angry stare. "Oh it's genuine enough, I'm not arguing about that, but it won't get you home."

"Why not?"

"I told you. Two thousand dollars is the price of a one-way passage to Venus, the fare back to Earth is a lot different."

"I don't understand?" Sam frowned in bewilderment as he stared first at the factor then at Jim. "Isn't the fare the same either way?"

"No."

"Then how much more do I need?"

"The fare back is twenty thousand dollars," explained Jim quietly. "You need a further eighteen thousand dollars—and the only way to make money on Venus is by selling the buttons at ten cents a pound!"

It took a moment for it to register, to sink into the consciousness, burrowing deep and corroding as it went. Jim remained silent, watching the effect of his words on the mirror of the young man's face, watching as he had watched so often before.

First came surprise, then a numb disbelief followed by a reluctant acceptance of the situation. The worst part was the sudden quick mental calculation bringing despair and hopeless frenzy.

They all went through it. Some accepted it with calm fatalism—they were the lucky ones. Others refused at first to admit it, then tried with desperate intensity to do the impossible—they didn't last. A few—broke!

"Eighteen thousand dollars," Sam whispered. "But why? Why?"

"Compensation for replaced freight." Jim reached for the jug and held it towards the young man. "Take a drink and pull yourself together. Remember that you're not the only one."

"It's a trick!" He stared at them with sick eyes, ignoring the jug. "It's a filthy trick! I won't stand it, they must take me back, they've got to!"

"Steady," warned Jim. He frowned at the factor and irritably jerked his head. The big man swallowed and thrust his pistol back into its holster, but kept his hand hovering near the butt.

"Nobody's robbing you," explained Jim in a gentle voice. "Look at it this way. To give you passage means that they have to discard more than two hundred pounds of buttons. Those buttons would fetch twenty thousand dollars on Earth, so all they ask is that you should compensate them for lost profit. It's reasonable enough when you consider it."

"Reasonable?" Sam shrugged himself away from the older man. He looked sick, his sallow features livid and glistening with sweat, and his eyes burning coal rimmed with white. "Can they get away with this? Humans aren't freight don't they know that? Why should they take my money and give me passage to Venus when they know all the time that it is a one-way passage? Why should they be allowed to exile men and women here for the sake of dollars?"

He began to stride jerkily about the narrow confines of the trading post.

"How can I get back home," he muttered, "how?" He bumped into Jim and staggered a little. Slowly his eyes came into focus and he grabbed at the older man's naked shoulder. "You've got to help me, Jim. You've got to!"

"Why?" Jim shrugged off the hand and glanced towards the door and the man who entered. He was a short, lithe man dressed in worn leather and with the darting eyes and hair-trigger reflexes of a space pilot. He glanced curiously at the khaki-dressed figure of the young man, then at the factor.

"Blasting off now," he said. "Anything more to go?"

"No." Max answered the routine question as it was expected to be answered. Last-minute additions were unpopular because of weight restrictions and the pilot's liked to blast off strictly to schedule. The lithe man nodded, and gestured farewell.

"See you soon."

"Goodbye." Max shrugged and wiped perspiration from his heavy features. "Lucky devils," he grumbled. "They can get home every second trip, I've got to stay here five years."

He yawned and rubbed his paunch as he stared at the ship.

"At least you know when you're going home," Sam said bitterly. "It must make you proud to remember how you exploit your fellow men."

The big man slowly straightened from where he leaned on the counter, his face red and angry. He slipped the pistol from his belt and pointed it at the young man's stomach, the gleaming weapon looking like a toy in the big fist.

"Get out you," he spat. "Get out and do your crying and whining somewhere else. Get out now!"

A siren yelled with a note of warning cutting off the young man's reply, and he stared at the glistening shape of the ship with sudden desperation.

"No!" He sprang towards the door. "They can't go, not yet, not without me!" Suddenly he was running across the flame-scorched landing field towards the spaceship. Jim yelled a futile warning, then lunged after him.

It was useless.

The siren wailed again, and fire spouted from the swelling venturis at the base of the vessel. A giant began to mutter, the deep whistle rising to a screaming whine, and the stabbing flame of the rocket exhaust seared the smoking dirt.

Jim skidded to a halt, his hands shielding his eyes from the glare. He had a moment's impression of a figure limned in flame, then the ship rose and the field was silent.

Chapter III

It was going to rain again. He could tell by the way the clouds had darkened, piling up in sullen masses across the sky and turning the normal golden splendour of the sun into a deep orange. Around him the last traces of the swollen buttons were being torn to shreds by the hordes of scavenger beetles, their manibles clashing with a faintly metallic sound as they devoured the limp fungi.

He shrugged as he kicked one from his foot, harmless, the oddly shaped insects were essential to the life-cycle of the planet. They ate the fungi and their droppings helped spread the fertile spores, restoring the eternally dying root beds far beneath the rich loam. Rain would trigger the spores into sudden violent growth, and the bloated fungi provided food for the beetles. Cause and effect, he thought looking at them. No buttons then no food for the beetles. No beetles, and the buttons would die through non-replacement of their root beds. Cause and effect.

Like the desire for an extended life, and man's occupation of Venus. What the military had failed to do, business had done. From the buttons came the oil which restored youth, giving men an extra decade to tread their planet, turning the clock back and turning grey hair dark, old flesh firm, dull eyes bright again. Ten ounces of the oil would give ten extra year of life—and what man or woman could resist the temptation of restoring their waning powers?

Ten ounces, but it took one hundred pounds of buttons to provide it. One hundred pounds of raw material costing ten thousand dollars. Cost of processing brought that figure to fifteen. Add profit, add greed, add a tremendous demand and a limited supply. Add research and the glittering promise of repeated rejuvenations.

Call it thirty thousand dollars a shot. Thirty thousand International Dollars—more than a normal man could ever hope to save in a lifetime, but nothing to the wealthy. Call it monopoly. Call it dynamite. Call it a black mark on the progress of man. Call it big business—very big!

Spaceships were few and those few were concentrated and directed by one company. They had one purpose—to carry freight from Earth to Venus, and buttons from Venus to Earth. Outward bound they carried cigarettes, soap, razors, knives, luxury goods for the exiles. They also carried passengers.

Every trip from Earth was run at a loss, but the return trips

were run at a profit. Profit and loss had to balance with the edge on the profit side. Spaceships cost money, lots of it, and the shareholders had a right to some return for their capital. The buttons provided that return, a good return, and the buttons would continue to do so.

He walked slowly from the landing field, the high wire mesh fence trailing away on his left. Huts lay before him, a rude huddle of branches thatched with the wide leaves of the towering fern trees. The settlement.

A woman nodded to him as he passed the open front of her hut. A thin emaciated woman with sunken cheeks and burning eyes, the bones of her ribs protruding from the deathly whiteness of her skin. A twist of bark served as a skirt, another for a halter. Her hair hung limp and tangled on her thin shoulders.

Someone coughed from within the hut, and a baby uttered a thin wail. A man's voice spoke soothingly and the wailing died into silence. Shadows moved within the hut and a man stepped into the orange glow of the hidden sun.

He was a tall man with his shoulders bent in a perpetual stoop, and his hair and beard were a flaming red. He grinned at Jim with a flash of strong white teeth, then spoke quietly to the woman. She nodded and disappeared into the hut.

"Trouble, Doc?"

"The usual, Jim. Too much damp, too many minor ailments, too much neglect and not enough medicines." He swung the bag of woven reeds he carried over his shoulder, hooking a thumb through the supporting string. His long stride matched that of the other man, and together they walked through the settlement.

Several people nodded to them, men and women, children too, their little faces white and colourless, their skin showing the obvious signs of a poor diet. The tall red-haired man tightened his lips as he noticed them, clenching his hands until the knuckles gleamed white beneath the skin.

"Look at them, Jim! Look at them and then ask one question."

"What is that, Doc?"

"What value is set on a single human life?"

"It depends on whose life we are talking about," said Jim drily. "Personally I set quite a high value on mine, but I wouldn't give a bent one-cent piece for certain individuals on Earth."

"Such as?"

"The broken down reprobates who can pay more than they should for a few extra years of dissipation."

"Oh." The tall man seemed disappointed. Jim smiled at him.

"Wrong answer, Doc?"

"Why blame the consumer when the provider is at fault?"

"Meaning the company who operate the space lines?" Jim shook his head. "You know how I feel about that, and you are wrong to blame them. Where there is a demand, then there will be someone to supply it. Is that wrong? Is trade and business wrong? If it is wrong in one instance then when is it right? No, Doc. You can't blame the business men for what's happening here."

"Do you defend all this?" The tall man gestured towards the huddled shacks of the settlement, his voice gritty with anger. "Is this good business? Look at them, Jim. Most are in poor health, the constant dampness and humidity have caused pneumonic troubles, and the rest have dietic disorders." He looked at the lithe figure at his side.

"How you keep your health I can't imagine, you were one of the first arrivals weren't you?"

"Yes."

"Then why isn't your skin scaled and soggy? How is it that you have retained health when others are suffering from vitamin lack and intestinal disease?"

"You know how, Doc." Jim smiled as he rubbed at his stubble. "I don't drink home brew because I like it, and some of the things I've eaten would turn a normal stomach, but they've kept me alive. If the others would forget Earth, forget the food they would like to eat, and eat the food they can get, then they wouldn't suffer half as much as they do."

"I know." The tall man seemed to sag a little as he stared at the children playing in the dirt between the huts. "I've told them, and some of them are doing what I suggested, but the others!" Almost it seemed as if he would spit in utter disgust. "They want white bread, Jim. Eggs and milk. Fish and pork, all the things impossible to get. I've told them that the buttons are edible, that the scavenger beetles are good to eat and that home brew contains almost all the vitamins they need, but will they believe me? Will they hell!"

He twisted his head, staring over his shoulder at the hut he had just left.

"That woman now, been here three years and just had a baby.

She's starving, Jim, and the baby can't get any milk. Her husband is spitting his life out in gouts of blood, but will they do as I tell them? No! She refuses to eat anything but recognisable food, and that just about limits what they eat to a few fruits and vegetables. It looks nice, it even tastes nice, but they may as well be eating vacuum for all the good it's doing them."

"Take it easy," suggested Jim quietly. "I don't like what I see either, but it does no good to rail against those who have nothing to do with it. We'll work something out."

"Maybe." The redhead didn't sound too hopeful. "For all the good our letters have done we might as well have saved our money. What's wrong with the people of Earth? Don't they care what happens to us?"

"Why should they?" Jim smiled at the expression on the doctor's face. "I never did hope for any results from that propaganda, but I fell in with your suggestion because as a business man I believe in trying everything once. As an ex-business man I should say," he corrected wily. "Temporarily out of business."

"Permanently I would say." The tall man frowned at a sudden thought. "Where's that young man who arrived on the last ship? Is he still with you?"

Jim shook his head, staring down at the rich dirt.

Thunder muttered on the horizon, and the sun dimmed even more as the thick dark clouds gathered overhead. The scavenger beetles scurried among the remnants of the swollen buttons, their mandibles clicking as they sensed the coming storm, and began burrowing for shelter.

"What happened to the young man?"

"Dead."

"What!" The tall doctor stopped and stared at Jim in amazed disbelief. "How?"

"He learned the truth, Doc. He was one of those who couldn't take it. He broke."

"I half expected that, he wasn't the right type for adventure, a weakling living on his nerves." The doctor shrugged. "So he's dead, how did it happen?"

"I saw it happen," said Jim tightly. "I saw it, and I never want to see it again." He smiled briefly at the silent question in the tall man's eyes.

"He wasn't killed, murdered I mean, and he didn't really commit suicide. He ran into the rocket exhaust."

"I see."

"No! No, Doc. you don't see!" Jim broke into a sweat as

he remembered what he had left on the seared dirt of the landing field.

"I saw. I saw what happens to a man when he is roasted alive! I saw his nice new clothing all burned away, his skin all cracked and brown as if he had been in an oven like some joint of pork. His face wasn't there, only a bloody mask of bone and charred skin, his hands were skeleton hands and his chest and stomach were red with lungs and guts. I saw it I tell you! I saw it!"

Abruptly he rocked to a savage blow, feeling the blood start to his cheek and feeling the impact of the open slap. He tensed, then relaxed as he saw the worry in the doctor's eyes. Ruefully he rubbed his cheek and smiled.

"Sorry, but I'm not used to sights like that. Not when I remember some of the things I said to him before. . . ." He swallowed, fighting the desire to vomit again.

"Death was instantaneous of course," murmured the tall man. "What made him do it?"

"He wanted to go home, that's why. All of us want to go home, perhaps it would be better if we all tried getting there the same way."

"You don't really believe that, Jim. I know you too well." The doctor hitched his reed bag higher on to his shoulder. They had left the huddled shacks of the settlement and strode between the great boles of the soaring fern trees, the wide leaves sickly green in the dim light. A hut stood on a slight elevation, and Jim glanced up at the sullen sky.

"You'd better stay with me until after the rain, Doc. The storm looks as if it is going to be a good one."

Thunder muttered in the distance, and lightning stabbed overhead. Tension grew and hung heavily on the humid air, filling the silent forest with quiet unseen menace. The tall man nodded.

"Mrs Bender is expecting her second child but it isn't due just yet and I may as well stay with you." He glanced at the lithe figure at his side. "You should get married, Jim. Living alone as you do isn't good for a man, and I know of at least two women who would be glad to have you."

"Maybe I don't want them, or perhaps I just like to live alone." Jim paused at the open front of his hut, and kicked at a scurrying scavenger beetle. "Damn these things, I'll bet that they've eaten everything in sight." Irritably he entered the hut.

He felt upset, restless, impatient and angry with himself. He hoped that the worm would arrive on the next ship.

Chapter IV

Five men and three women arrived on the next ship, a record. Jim stood by the high wire fence and watched them as they walked from the landing ramp their eyes eager as they stared at the rough huts of the settlement. He smiled a little as he saw their looks of disappointment, and nudged the tall figure of the doctor at his side.

"I'll bet that the price of buttons has risen on Earth. Take me on?"

"A pack of razor blades against a bar of soap," agreed the doctor. "Let's find out if there is anything for us."

Max greeted them with a smile, his big red face glistening with sweat as he sorted mail and various small packages. He jerked a thumb towards a sealed metal box covered in stencils and cancelled rocket mail stamps.

"That's for you, Doc. Someone's finally thought enough of you to send you a birthday present. Fifty pounds earth-weight, five hundred dollars for freight alone." He looked curiously at the sealed container. "What is it, Doc?"

"Medical equipment." The tall red-haired man stared at the flat package. "Can I take it?"

"Well. . . ?" Max pursed his lips, then grinned. "I should check it, but what the hell? Take it, Doc., if they passed it at head office that's good enough for me."

"Thanks. Anything else?"

"Not this time, the passengers took almost all the cargo space." The factor grinned and rubbed gently at his paunch. "Did you see those women? Good lookers aren't they, I expect that Jim will be getting married anytime now."

Jim grunted, staring at the little heap of mail and trade goods. "Did my worm arrive?"

"No. I'm sorry, Jim, but I expect that they are doubtful at head office."

"Why should they be? I've paid for it haven't I? There's nothing wrong in my having a worm, what's the matter with your people on Earth?"

"I don't know, Jim, but what can I do?" The fat man spread his hands helplessly. "I've requisitioned it, and you should be getting it soon." He smiled ingratiatingly at the angry man. "It'll arrive soon, I'm sure of it, perhaps the order got lost somewhere."

"Then send another."

"I will, Jim. I will, but you know how it is. Perhaps head office doesn't agree with you running a distillery, after all our franchise states that no merchandise will be carried if it represents a threat to the security of the company or the well-being of the community. You can't blame them for that."

"Who wants to run a still?" Jim stared calmly at the factor. "I want it for medical purposes, pure alchohol is needed here for sterilization and operative purposes. That right, Doc?"

"Certainly." The tall man winked at the factor. "Put that on the requisition and I'll sign it as the sole medical representative of the settlement. Jim only ordered it because I had no credit with the company."

"Why didn't you tell me that before!" Max grinned as he scribbled on a form. "I'll send off a new order, and you should get it on the third ship from now. Anything else?"

"What is the market price of buttons now? Earth price I mean?"

"Hundred and fifty a pound," answered Max absently. He stared at the two men. "Why?"

"Nothing." Jim grinned at the tall doctor. "You owe me a pack of blades, tell Max to transfer the cost from your credit to mine, I may need them one day."

Together they left the trading post, feeling the stares of the new arrivals at their nakedness and savage-like appearance. Jim flushed as he heard a woman laugh and a man snigger. He halted, his hand slipped down to the sheathed blade at his side, then as the doctor pulled at his arm he smiled and ignored the sneers.

It wasn't easy.

It was never easy for a civilised man to forget his heritage, ignore his background, and set the ignorant mirth of others at its true value. Civilization forced a man to run with the herd, to desire the respect of others—and to work like a dog to gain it. Civilisation brought more than superficial comfort, it brought responsibility, the driving need to keep up with others, to dress as they did, to live as they did. It was a race, with material possession as the mark of success—and sniggering laughter the reward of failure.

He thought of his knife plunged deep into a throat, stained with red blood and cutting off sneers and ignorant gibes forever. It brought a feral satisfaction.

The box was heavy and the shape made it awkward to carry. The tall doctor was streaming with more than normal perspiration as he gently set it down on the packed dirt floor of the hut, and

taking a phial from his reed medical bag, he shook a few little white tablets into the palm of his hand and swallowed them. He looked ruefully at the almost empty container.

"Have to get some more salt pills soon," he muttered. "Another harvest gone."

Jim shrugged and lifted the box onto the rough table in the centre of the hut. "Salt is something we can't do without, not in this climate, so it's no good worrying about it." He stared at the metal container. "Going to open it?"

"Naturally."

Impatiently Jim watched as the tall thin doctor broke the seals and swung open the lid. He smiled at what he saw, and gently began removing layers of soft packing.

"I knew that those letters would do some good," he said. "You didn't believe me, Jim, but look what they've sent me."

It was a medical kit, one of the most compact and up-to-date ones Jim had every seen. Rows of glittering hypodermics nestled in their individual compartments, the glass and metal reflecting the soft light from the shielded sun. Surgical knives, forceps, clamps and a dozen odd-shaped instruments lined divided trays. Ampoules of drugs, cans of ether, thermometers, all the things any doctor on an expedition would desire. Tenderly the tall man touched them, his fingers gliding over glass and plated steel, his eyes misty as he remembered the past.

"What's this?" Jim stooped and picked up a thin sheet of paper. "Looks like a letter, better read it, Doc."

"It's from my old students at the university." He read it swiftly his eyes scanning the reduced typescript on the onion skin paper. "They had a collection among themselves and raised enough to buy this kit and pay for the freight." He dropped the letter and sighed as he stared at the glittering array of instruments.

"You see, Jim. You were wrong, some people do care what happens to us, doesn't this prove it?"

"No. Your gift proves nothing but that charity is not yet dead, but what else? What does a collection amount to after all? Isn't it a cheap way of getting rid of a conscience? They send you a medical kit, and you think that they are wonderful, but are they? You tried to raise a storm of protest with your letters, a storm which would force the company to treat human beings as other than freight. I knew that you were wrong, but you were so sure that it would work. Well it has, you have been bought off with a medical kit, a few hundred dollars worth of usable supplies—and the price of buttons has risen fifty per cent."

"It isn't that way at all," protested the tall man. "Those students did this out of the goodness of their own hearts, they didn't have to do it but they did. Is that wrong?"

"No. No it isn't wrong, but what good does it do us? You can alleviate a little pain, perform a few minor operations, allow people to live a little longer than they should." He stared at the array of hypodermics then at the tall figure of the doctor.

"Don't misunderstand me, Doc. I'm very glad that you have received that kit, more glad than you know, but remember to keep things in their right perspective. Gifts and charity have never cured social ills, they have prolonged them. While people can buy off their conscience with a few dollars they will do nothing else."

"Even if you are right, what else can we do?"

"I went along with you, Doc, now I want to know something. Will you go along with me?"

"I don't understand? Where are you going?"

"That doesn't matter, but I have my own ideas. Well?"

Slowly the tall doctor nodded, and swung shut the lid of his medical kit. "Naturally I'll do as you say, Jim, but. . ."

"No questions now, and no loose talk." Jim stared at the closed medical kit. "If they had really wanted to help us," he said bitterly, "they should have sent us guns."

The doctor looked at him with a strange expression.

. . . .

The next ship carried five women, stenographers, shop assistants, women with their heads filled with bright tales of easy wealth and surplus men. The one after unloaded four men and a married couple. The third ship carried a pile of trade goods, assorted mail, personal packages—and a woman.

She stood a little helplessly just outside the door of the trading post, a slender figured woman almost boyish in her trim khaki shirt and slacks. Her thick dark hair was cropped and swept up and back from the sides of her head. Her eyes were bright and blue, her lips red and full, her skin smooth and still bearing traces of a tan. She was neat, clean, and utterly beautiful.

Jim glanced at her as he entered the hut, noting the way she looked at him, her fine brows furrowing a little at the sight of his nakedness and dirt. She moved aside, not speaking, her eyes staring towards the high wire fence surrounding the landing field. He shrugged, and entered the dim interior.

Max waved towards him, his big red face creased and worried.

"Hello, Jim. Glad to see you."

"Has my worm arrived?"

"Yes." The factor lifted a coil of gleaming copper tubing from behind the counter, and glanced at the attached label "There's twenty dollars more to pay, alteration in freight charges."

"Take it from my credit," said Jim carelessly. He examined the gleaming tube with a critical eye, running his hands over the smooth surface, and sighing with satisfaction. "At last! Now we can really get something decent to drink." He winked at the fat man. "After the medical supplies are taken care of, of course."

They both laughed.

"See the new woman?" Max leaned across the counter. "The only one this trip but she makes up for all the others. What a girl!"

"Is she alone?"

"Yes." The factor shrugged. "Doesn't seem to want to talk to anyone, just stands there looking towards the gate."

"Maybe she expects a welcome committee?"

"Maybe, or perhaps she is waiting for someone to come and meet her." He frowned. "I don't know who that would be, I'd have heard if anyone was expecting a dish like that."

Jim shrugged, and glanced towards the open doorway. The sun rested, a golden patch of light low on the horizon and through the wire he could see some of the new arrivals lounging among the huts of the settlement.

"How did they take it?" He jerked his head towards the distant figures. Max shrugged.

"Two of the women had hysterics, and two of the men had to comfort them." He grinned and wiped his glistening face. "No need to worry about them, Jim. They are the type for this planet, wasters, natural-born beachcombers, they don't really care whether they make money or not, all they want is a soft life and a good time."

"Is that what you think?"

"What else? The women we get now are mostly man-mad would-be sirens. They think that Venus is full of millionaires looking for a wife, when they find that money doesn't mean anything here, they settle for a husband. One of them even approached me, said that as factor I'd be the best catch. Women!"

"Second phase," murmured Jim.

"What?"

"Nothing." He picked up his worm and started for the door, the woman entered as he neared it and he halted, giving

her room to pass. She stared at him, then at the big man behind the counter, her face tight and drawn with worry.

"Can you help me?"

"Certainly, Miss. What can I do for you?"

"I was expecting someone to meet me, my husband. Do you know where he is?"

"Your husband!" Max glanced towards Jim, gestured for him to remain. "What's his name?"

"Clegg. Samuel Clegg. He hasn't been here long, but he hasn't written and I grew worried. Do you know him?"

"Clegg?" Jim frowned and shook his head. "What was he like?"

"Young, not very tall and rather weak. He was a nervous type, highly strung." She twisted her hands in sudden emotion. "You must know him!"

"Young, highly strung, Samuel." Jim felt sick. "Max, she's talking about Sam!"

"You do know him!"

"We knew him," corrected Jim, and wished that he needn't say more.

Chapter V

They sat on the edge of his bed and stared at the darkening forest outside. The first shock had passed, the blind refusal to believe as if by sheer refutation an unpleasant fact could be obliterated, made as though it had never been. Tears had followed, and after a numb misery. Now they sat and stared, each busy with their own thoughts.

"Did you know him well?"

"No, Mary, not so well, remember he was here such a little time. Did you love him so much?"

"Yes." She sat staring at the dimming boles of the great fern trees, her voice low with the pain of remembrance. "I knew that he was weak, nervous, unreliable. I knew all that when we married, but there was something. . . ."

"Love?"

"Yes." She turned and looked at him. "How did he die?"

"An accident," lied Jim. "He was caught in the exhaust from a ship due to blast off. He didn't feel any pain, and I doubt if he ever knew what had happened." He twisted his lips in the darkness trying to imagine any man being fool enough to leave

such a woman for the sake of wealth. Stupid enough not to realise that all the International Dollars on Earth were worth nothing when compared to the love of such a person.

"I see." She clenched her hands and Jim was glad that she didn't stare at him. For the first time in many years he felt ashamed of his appearance, of the half-grown beard on his lips and chin, the dirt on his skin and the unkemptness of his hair.

"Why did he die?"

"I . . ." said Jim, and then stopped realising that she was talking to herself and not to him.

"We had enough, not much, perhaps not sufficient, but we were happy. Then Sam came home full of brilliant ideas. Venus was a treasure house, he said. A planet where a man could make his pile, then settle down to a life of ease. We had a little money, enough to pay a double passage, but he insisted on going alone. I forced him to pay in the extra money, I thought that it would do for his return trip if things went wrong."

She stirred on the soft ferns of the bed, and her face was a pale blob in the shadows.

"Why are you here, why is anyone here? Where is all the wealth? What is the secret behind this planet?" She turned to him, her eyes wide and glistening against the darkening night.

"I spoke to people before I left home. Some laughed, others shrugged, all said the same thing. The buttons fetched over a hundred dollars a pound on the open market, and they were free on Venus. It was as simple as that, too simple. I felt that somewhere there must be a catch, but Sam had gone and I hadn't heard from him. And so I came to join him, and now he's dead."

Tears came then, hot-burning tears of self-reproach and self-misery. Jim was glad to see them, the first few tears had been the result of frustration, these were Nature's anodyne to pain. He fought with himself not to take her in his arms.

A step sounded from the path outside the hut. A heavy footfall and the sound of a hail. Shadows loomed outside the opening, and the tall thin figure of the doctor entered the hut.

"How is she?"

"Better now." Jim rose and fumbled with the last few of his precious matches and the stub of a candle. He lit the wick, cursing the eternal dampness which made it splutter, and straightened to greet his guest.

"Anything new?"

"Yes." Tiredly the tall man slumped down onto the edge

of the bed, he ignored the softly weeping woman and stared at Jim with haggard eyes. "Trouble, Jim. Bad trouble."

"The new arrivals?"

"Yes. How did you know?"

"I expected it. What happened?"

"Murder!"

Silence grew in the hut as night began to close in over the silent planet.

Jim sighed and fumbled beneath the bed for his jug. He drank, offering it to the doctor, then replacing it at the other's refusal.

"Women?"

"Yes. One of the men, a newcomer, tried to kiss someone else's girl. There was a fight, and the new arrival wound up with a knife in his throat. That's bad, but the results are worse. The settlement's split into two factions, the old-timers and the new arrivals. There's talk of lynching parties and clear-outs."

"Second phase," muttered Jim.

"What?"

"Second phase, I expected it." He looked fondly at the gleaming metal of the copper coil. "Now we can get to work."

"I don't understand?"

"You will," promised Jim grimly. He turned to the girl. "Are you better now?"

"Yes." She straightened, adjusted her hair, and smiled a little shamefacedly. "Forgive me, but the shock. . . ."

"We understand but let the dead bury the dead. You are alive, on a strange planet, and you must take care of yourself." Jim stared at the doctor. "She had better stay with one of the women, Mrs. Burges could do with some help, and Mary can decide what to do later."

"I'll take her there," promised the doctor. He glanced at the black night and looked uncertainly at the dirt-streaked figure of the other man. "Must she go tonight?"

"No," said Jim positively. "Not as things are, not until the settlement has quietened down. You had both better stay here until light."

"But. . . .?" Mary looked uncertainly at the men and Jim laughed at the expression on her face.

"Don't worry about being compromised. Venus isn't Earth and Earth laws don't apply. You do as you wish when you wish.—how you wish. So long as you don't interfere with others then they won't interfere with you."

"He's right you know," said the doctor. "I do what I can to mend sick bodies, and the factor has authority to register marriages, divorces, births and deaths. Aside from that we are on our own. No police, no law, no newspapers to spread gossip or radio to repeat lies." He stretched, easing his long limbs. "In some ways Venus is a paradise."

"It could be," said Jim quietly. He stared at the dark night. "A new planet, fresh and unspoiled, just waiting to be used. We could build here, build a new civilisation one free from the threat of war and cleansed of internal strife. Men could be themselves, not one of a herd. We could start again, and this time leave out all the things which make peoples and races go rotten. We have a wonderful chance to create something good and fine—if they will let us."

"Who?" Mary looked at him with a new expression on her smooth features, as if she were seeing him for the first time. The doctor noticed it and smiled.

"The people themselves. Us. The race of homo sapiens. Can we build or must we always spoil what we create? Are we big enough to start again, or are we doomed always to fail?" He sighed as he turned to face her. "What do you think of men, Mary? Can it be done?"

"I don't know," she said doubtfully. "I am not a sociologist, I only know what every woman wants."

"Yes?"

"Peace. A home of her own. A husband, children and a clean world for them to grow up in. A woman wants the simple things, the decent things. Is that wrong?"

"No! That is what every sane person wants, but we are up against something too big for us." The doctor had little red spots of anger high on both cheeks as he jerked out the words.

"A simple thing, too simple perhaps for the mind of man to imagine. We must have progress, spaceships, armies and war. We must have radio and television, scandal and gossip, hate and fear, murder and cringing cowardice. We must have the lash of want, the drive of accumulated wealth, we must sneer and fawn. We must have civilisation, twenty first century model, we must have it and like it!"

He breathed deeply, his eyes glittering in the fitful light of the guttering candle and his pale cheeks red with repressed emotion.

"Mankind is sick, Mary. Sick in mind. Men have forgotten to think straight, they distrust charity, sheer from gene-

rosity and believe that kindness is a sign of weakness. Mankind is rotten!"

"Bunk!" Jim smiled down at the angry face of the doctor and calmly reached for his jug.

He drank, letting some of the noxious fluid rill down his chin and splash on his chest and thighs. He wiped his lips and chin and set down the empty container.

"Like most people, Doc., you are confusing a system with a living organism. You are hurt, so you must blame someone. You can't get your own way, so again you look for a scapegoat. It is a natural emotion, but a bad one. It has led to war and persecution, it always will."

He sighed and absently began honing his knife against the wide leather of his belt.

"We have a chance here to alter all that. I spoke of a second phase, I coined the term, because in a way I am a student of sociology, every business man is even though he may not know it, but I have taken the trouble to read a little about the subject. Venus isn't new. The mere fact that it is a new world doesn't make it new. It is new in only one thing—there are no natives."

"We can't be certain of that," protested the doctor. The planet hasn't really been explored."

"Agreed, but as far as we know there are no natives, and that assumption is good enough for what I am trying to explain." He tested the edge of the glittering blade against his thumb, and resumed his rhythmic honing motions.

"When ships first touched the tropical islands they traded beads and trinkets for cargoes of spices and rare gums. Naturally those cargoes were worth far more than what they paid, but they had to carry the stuff home and make a profit. The natives collected the spices, the factor paid them, and the ships called and freighted the goods away. Nothing wrong in that was there?"

"No," agreed the doctor reluctantly.

"After a while the trading post grew, men settled there and began to develop the land, they were the pioneers. After them came the exploiters, the gamblers, the get-rich-quick type of adventurer and finally came the solid business men, the builders, the long term specialists. Do you follow me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Now the same thing is happening here—but there are no natives. Now what does that make us?"

"I see." The doctor stared at the slender figure of the other man, and slowly nodded his head. "We are the natives!"

"Exactly, but there is one thing wrong with my explanation. If we were true natives we would be shoved aside to make room for the adventurers, we could be satisfied to trade the buttons for beads, cigarettes and cheap liquor. Why not? What standard of comparison would we have? A metal knife to a native would be treasure unimaginable—but we are not natives."

"Aren't we?" The tall doctor shrugged as he looked at the savage figure beside him. "What would you call yourself, Jim, a model of civilised man?"

"No, but I am not a native and never will be a native. I am talking about psychology now, my dress doesn't matter. What does matter is that I have the same brain as the new arrivals, I talk the same language, I like the same things. I am one of them, not a distinct species or race." He smiled at Mary and tested his knife again. Satisfied he slipped it back into its sheath.

"Now what great advantage have we over any native?"

"Advantage?" The doctor frowned. "I don't know, unless. . . ."

"Yes," said Jim quietly. "We can arouse a sympathy with the new arrivals. We can work together—something impossible for any true native to do with his exploiter. How could it be otherwise? They wouldn't be able to understand each other, they wouldn't even think along the same paths, but we can, we do. We are men, Earthmen, and they are our brothers, planetary brothers. We are in this together, and together we can find our way out."

"But why couldn't you have done this before?" Mary stared at them, only half understanding what they were talking about. "Why wait until now?"

"Because we had to wait. We had to arouse the old-timers from their apathy, jerk them into remembering who and what they are. The new arrivals have done that. This murder, bad as it is, can be a good thing. It has woken up the dreamers, and made them realise their danger."

"I still think that all this could have been done before."

"No. It could not have been done before." Jim smiled as he stared at her puzzled expression. "I am a business man, Mary, and I do things in a business like way. That means I do them in an efficient way. We needed the new arrivals, we needed the doctor's gift of medical supplies, and we needed this worm."

He touched the copper coil with gentle hands, smiling as

he stared down at the seamless tube. "We'll have a general meeting tomorrow, now let's get some sleep."

Deliberately he blew out the candle.

Chapter VI

They gathered in a clearing surrounded by the mighty boles of the towering trees, two hundred of them, all the available men of the settlement. They were a mixed lot, naked skins and bark cloth garments mingled with the khaki of neatly dressed new arrivals. Most of them were emaciated, with rough skin and protruding bones. A few were clean shaven, most had beards, all wore long sheath knives.

Jim stood on a rising hump of ground and watched as they gathered, they moved reluctantly, glaring suspiciously at each other, their hands hovering in the region of their blades.

"Listen!" yelled Jim. "Gather close to me, and listen." He stared at them as they crowded around the hummock, and he grinned as he saw the red hair of the doctor flash as he forced his way through the crowd.

"Are they all here, Doc?"

"All that could walk, all that would come." The tall man climbed up beside Jim. "The women are staying behind and minding the children. They aren't needed are they?"

"No. We could do with far less people here but if we had a secret meeting it would defeat our own object." He faced the crowd, noticing how the group in khaki-drill kept away from the half naked old-timers.

"I called this meeting," he commenced, "because there has been a killing, the first since men came to Venus. I'm throwing no blame, and as we have no police there will be no punishment, but we don't want it to happen again."

"It was their fault," yelled a bearded man. He glared at the group of neat figures. "They started the trouble."

"And you finished it." Jim held up his hand for silence. "Let's forget it. A man is dead, well what of it? Did he have any friends?"

He stared at them as they looked at each other, shifting uncomfortably on their feet.

"No? I thought not, so there can be no reason for anyone getting excited about it. Now for the benefit of those who haven't been here very long, I'm going to repeat a few facts and figures.

We are all stranded on Venus, every one of us. You know that, by now you have already worked it out for yourselves, and that being so, we must learn to work together. I've called this meeting to remind all of you that we have something in common. There are no bosses here, no law, no exploited. We have no wealthy and no poor. We are equal."

"You don't class me with the rest of these bums I hope?" A man neat and clean in his khaki thrust himself forward, his face red and angry. He glared contemptuously at Jim.

"Look at them, and look at yourself. What kind of a man are you? Naked, dirty, unshaven, you look like a tramp. Why should I listen to you?"

"I've been here over five years," said Jim quietly. "When did you arrive?"

"A short while ago, but does that make any difference? You can buy stuff from the trading post if you'd work to gather a harvest. Any man can remain clean."

"Agreed. I could buy soap, razor blades, junk like that but I don't want to. I mind my business, you mind yours and if you don't want to stay you needn't."

The man hesitated, then flushed and rejoined the little group of new arrivals. Jim stared at the crowd.

"See what I mean? That man has only just arrived and already he thinks of us as a different species. Wait until his clothing rots, until he marries and his kids need canned milk. Wait until he snaps the blade of his knife and has to buy another one. You know what I'm talking about, you've all been through it." He stared directly at the little group in their neat khaki.

"I'm trying to help you people, but if you think that you know it all then don't let me stop you. If you want to learn then stay. Is there any of you who thinks that he knows all there is to know?"

They didn't answer, but they stayed and some of them seemed anxious.

It had grown hot and the humid air seemed to clog the lungs and drain the vitality from brain and blood. Jim swayed a little passing his hand over his eyes and trying to remember when he had last eaten. The doctor pressed something into his hand, and gratefully he swallowed the salt pills.

"It is a question of just how much you want to get back home," he said. "Do you want to get back to Earth?"

Their answer came as a growl, an animal-like sound echoing

from the great trees and seeming to hang suspended in the air. A man struggled forward from where he stood, his khaki damp and sodden with sweat.

"Naturally we want to get back home," he shouted. "I've a wife and child waiting for me. What are you getting at?"

"Don't you know? Haven't you figured it out yet?" Jim stared pityingly at the worried looking man. "You know how much you can get for the buttons from the trading post?"

"Yes, the factor told us. Ten cents a pound."

"Well?"

Silence fell as the man made swift mental calculations. He stared at Jim. "Two years at the most, and I'll be able to retire a rich man."

Laughter drifted from the assembled crowd. Mocking laughter, cruel and utterly disillusioned. The man stared about him, great globules of sweat glistening on his face and neck.

"It rains about two hundred days a year, and each time it rains we can gather a harvest. An experienced man can gather about fifty pounds of acceptable buttons each harvest, and if he is very good, even more." Jim paused. "So with a good years work a man can earn a thousand dollars. Now do you see?"

"I can earn more than that," protested the man. "I've picked cotton, I'm quick."

"Be as quick as you like the fact remains that a passage to Earth will cost you twenty thousand dollars, maybe more." Jim was deliberately brutal. "Twenty years constant work my friend. Twenty years. Do you still want to go home?"

The silence grew. The air seemed filled with tension as each man went over the same old figures. They had done it a thousand times, and always the answer remained the same. A lifetime of solid work.

Exile!

"Now a man can't live here without salt, he sweats, and the lost salt must be replaced. The vegetation has a little but not enough, so you must buy salt pills from the factor. Maybe you like to shave, a pack of blades costs a harvest, a bar of soap the same. A razor will take three good crops, a can of dried milk for an ailing child six. If you smoke then you'll work for cigarettes alone, and a box of matches will set you back a day's work. A candle will take care of five harvests, a new knife twenty. Clothes will keep you busy for months, and if you like canned food, then you won't earn enough to eat."

He paused, staring at them, feeling the sweat trickle down his naked chest.

"You can wear bark of course, eat local food, give up shaving and washing with soap. You can watch children starve for want of milk their mothers can't supply, and see invalids crave for some delicacy they can't earn. You can forget that you're men, live like animals, sleeping when the sun sets, and rising when it is light again, but you must have salt. That is one thing you can't do without, and so you must gather the buttons and sell for what you can get."

"I don't believe it!" The cotton picker stared desperately at his companions. "They couldn't do this to us, they couldn't!"

"Why not?" Jim stared coldly at the man. "Did anyone force you to come here? Did they employ you, lie to you? No. You came because you hoped to get rich. You're here because you wanted to come, and for no other reason."

Silence fell and the heavy air strained with hidden tension.

A man hawked and spat. A big thick-set man with a blotched red face and ears thick with scar tissue, his shirt strained across the muscles of his back and he wore his trousers thrust into big knee-boots. His hands were scarred as from many blows, and his lips twisted in a perpetual sneer. Hair matted his chest thrusting in little tufts from his open shirt, and his teeth were black and broken.

"Lies," he sneered. "Dirty lies."

"So?" Jim stared at him, half-hearing the doctor's low warning. "What do you know about it?"

"I know this. I'm not going to sweat collecting buttons. You can do it for me." He turned to his companions. "How about it fellows? If this dirty native won't work we'll make him, eh?"

"I am not a native," said Jim curtly. He tried to ignore the man. "I have told all of you what the situation is here, to most of you it's an old tale. To you others it may have come as a surprise. No one is to blame, we have merely been caught in an unfortunate situation, but there may be a way out."

"What is it?" The cotton picker moved forward, his face tense and anxious. "Can we ever get back home?"

"Not as things are, not while we have to pay passage based on displaced freight when the freight is worth twenty thousand dollars."

"First I want you all to let me have your harvests. It is time that we began working as a single unit and not as a collection

of individuals. I want you all to make your credit with the trading post over to me, and I want you all to work at full capacity until I tell you otherwise."

"What do we get out of it?" The cotton picker was very anxious. Jim shrugged.

"You must trust me. Well?"

A ripple of conversation passed over the crowd. Men muttered to each other, glancing at the almost naked man on the hummock and biting their lips with indecision. He stood quietly waiting for their reply, and suddenly he didn't really care what the reply might be. It was too hot, the air was too thick and heavy, action, even the mental action of thought, was too much trouble. He felt very tired and his mouth seemed full of vile tasting cotton.

He didn't see the doctor's worried expression or feel his supporting arm. His skin burned and he longed for the dark coolness of his hut.

An old man, his face hidden behind a bush of grey beard raised his thin voice.

"We all know Jim, and we can trust him. I'm willing to hand him my harvest."

Others joined in the general chorus, even some of the new arrivals agreeing to let a single man do their trade. All except one.

The big thick-set man spat and sneered at those around him. He laughed and pointed to Jim, contempt in his every gesture.

"Fools! Can't you see that he wants you all to give him your money. He'll take it, and the next thing you know he'll be heading for Earth leaving you all in debt. Why not trust the company? They treated me square, and they'll treat you the same. We want no agitators here, we can do without his kind. A trouble maker, that's all he is."

"Shut up!"

"Try and make me, tramp!"

"I've warned you," said Jim coldly. "Keep your big mouth out of this."

"Threatening me?" The big man grinned and showed his broken teeth. He stood in an awkward posture, one hand hidden behind his back, and suddenly those around him forced themselves away.

Jim smiled, a thin tight smile, and rested his hand on the hilt of his knife. When he moved his arm was a blur of motion,

the blade a glimmer of steel. The big man coughed and fell, blood rilling from his punctured throat.

Chapter VII

Max grinned wiping the eternal sweat from his beefy features and widening his eyes at the bags of buttons Jim had brought for trade. He busied himself examining and weighing the harvest, and shot shrewd glances at the thin figure of the other man.

"Heard that you had some sort of a fever, Jim. You alright now?"

"Yes. The Doc. pulled me round with some of his new drugs. It weakened me though."

"I also heard about that meeting you had, killed a man didn't you?"

"He was armed," said Jim casually. "It was me or him."

A man wouldn't stand much of a chance in a knife fight with you, you're too handy with a blade."

"He had a gun, wore it in his hip pocket. It was a lucky throw."

"I heard that you threw all of twenty feet. Did you?"

"About that."

"And that you've talked the settlement into making you their sole agent for handling the buttons."

"You hear too much," snapped Jim. "Did you get all the stuff ready?"

"Yes." The big man sulked for a moment as he piled packages onto the rough counter, then curiosity getting the better of him, he smiled.

"Did the worm suit you, Jim?"

"Yes." Jim grinned at the other's expression and took a squat earthenware jar from a reed bag. "Try the brew," he invited. "It was worth waiting for that tubing it's better than brandy."

He took a swig and handed across the container. "Here."

"Thanks." The factor gulped at the potent spirit and coughed as tears started to his eyes. "What is it made of, Jim, dynamite?"

"Something like that, have some more."

The jar tilted again, and the factor shook his head as he set down the jar. "Remember me when you brew some more of that stuff. I'd appreciate a jug or two to keep me company." He

stared out of the door at the circling fence. "It gets lonely here at times, especially at night."

"Why don't you come down into the settlement?"

"I can't, regulations say I'm to remain within call of the radio beacon, I can never tell if a ship is due, not with the schedules they're running nowadays." He burped a little and wiped his lips.

"A hell of a job," he grumbled. "I'm supposed to run this place single handed, if it wasn't for the pay I'd have quit long ago."

"Can you quit?"

"Certainly I can quit. If I stick the five years I'm guaranteed a passage home, but if I'm willing to pay my own I can quit anytime."

"Twenty thousand dollars is a lot of cash," reminded Jim quietly. "I think that I'd try and stick it."

"I'm going to," promised the fat man, "don't worry, I'm no fool." He burped again and reached for his books.

"Now let me see. Total credit of the entire settlement minus the value of goods taken, plus the value of delivered harvest." He glanced at the other man. "You still have some money left, anything more that you want?"

"Yes." Jim threw several packages onto the counter. "Send these on the next ship."

"Letters?" Max balanced them on one fat hand and frowned at Jim. "Who would you be writing to?"

"My lawyers, I had some property when I left and I want to sell it."

"Pretty heavy aren't they?" The big man weighed them and stuck on the appropriate stamps. "That about clears your credit." He glanced puzzledly at the pile of trade goods. "I can't imagine what you want all those salt pills for, and soap and knives. I can understand the canned milk, but candles and matches are something you've always managed to do without, What's the idea, Jim?"

"Stocking up before the price rises," said Jim absently. He watched his helpers load the precious goods into reed bags and carry them away.

"Goodbye, Max."

"Goodbye? But you'll be in tomorrow won't you?"

"No. I'm going on a short trip, I want to explore a little."

"I'll see you again though won't I?"

"Sure you will." Jim gestured and left the trading post.

He was smiling as he went.

Mary came from the hut as he approached, she had altered since her arrival, her hair had grown a little and her figure seemed even more slender than normal. She wore a halter and skirt of beaten bark, and her small feet were protected with sandals of bark thonged to her slim legs. She smiled and waved and Jim felt his heart accelerate as he saw her.

A second figure emerged from the hut, then a third, and the spell was broken with their arrival.

"How did it go?" The tall figure of the red-headed doctor seemed more stooped than usual and his thin features were sharp and tense. Jim nodded at the third person.

"Hello Mrs Burges, how is the baby now?"

"As well as can be expected, Jim. Mary here is a great help." She looked at the two men. "Are you going off again?"

"Yes, care to come with us, Mary?"

"May I?" She glanced at the woman at her side. "Will you be able to manage?"

"Of course I will, dear. You go off and have a good time." She smiled at Jim. "About time certain persons made their minds up I say. If they don't then there are some as will step in first."

"Goodbye," said Jim hastily. "Ready, Doc?"

"Ready."

"Good, come on, Mary." He picked up a bag and together they strode off into the forest.

* * * *

They walked a long way.

It rested in a small clearing, a contraption of crude pottery and cruder brick. It squatted on a nest of glowing charcoal, and the twisting copper tubing from its summit was strange and alien against the primitiveness of the rest. A man squatted by the fire, feeding it with scraps of wood and another poured water over the copper worm. Others tended the distilled liquor and still others worked on earthenware jugs and containers.

"What is it?" Mary frowned as she stared at the strange apparatus. "What are those men doing?"

"A still, and those men are tending it." Jim stared proudly at the contraption. "Look at it, Mary. The first non-essential construction on the planet. A still! An apparatus to make alcohol from buttons and other sugar bearing fungi and roots."

"What's it for?"

"I told you, to make alcohol."

"But why, Jim?"

"We can get drunk on it," said Jim cheerfully. "Have you ever been drunk, Mary?"

"No, and I don't think that I want to." She stared at him a frown creasing her fine brows. "I know you too well for that, Jim. What is the real reason?"

"Can't you guess?"

"Is it something to do with our getting back home?"

"Yes."

"But how? What good does making alcohol do? How will it help us?" She grabbed his arm in semi-annoyance and he smiled over her head at the tall doctor.

"Shall we tell her?"

"Why not, they'll all know soon." The doctor shrugged and set down his bag. "You may as well now that she is here."

Jim sighed and sat down on the rich black loam, resting his back against the bole of a fern tree. Mary sat beside him, and for a moment he remained silent, enjoying the nearness of her and toying with idle thoughts.

"Well?" she said.

"Mary, you must have wondered about one thing since you arrived here. You know of course that the rejuvenating oil from the buttons can't be transported, the shock of take-off alters the chemical balance so that it breaks down into other compounds. Even when cushioned and refrigerated it breaks down, it is too unstable."

"I had wondered about that," she admitted. "It seemed the obvious thing to do, extract the oil I mean and ship that instead of the buttons themselves."

"That was the first thing they tried, the extraction plant is still locked in the trading post, but it wouldn't work. They must use the buttons themselves."

"I think I know what you're getting at," she said slowly. "I have wondered about it. If the buttons are so precious and as they pay so little, why do the settlers still harvest them? Why not just refuse to gather them until they get more pay?"

"Exactly. That is the one obvious fact, and it is the one key to the whole problem." He turned a little and faced her, wishing that he had taken time to shave off his beard and wash with real soap.

"It all rests on the freight charges. The people have always

wanted to get back home, and sub-consciously they have been afraid of offending the company. They thought along the lines that even though they didn't get what they had expected for the buttons, still it lowered freight costs, and so made it that much easier to pay passage. False logic of course, but there were other reasons."

"The salt pills?"

"Yes, that and other things." He paused, staring at the busy figures of the workmen and recalling the distant past.

Remembering!

He remembered his first savage bitterness and the defiant refusal to gather and sell the precious buttons. Cramp had almost killed him, cramp induced by the lack of salt, and so reluctantly he had traded for the necessary tablets.

It had grown too dismal in the dark, the nights were too long and the forest too silent for a man used to the busy hum of cities. It seemed essential to gather a few harvests and buy candles and matches.

His knife had broken, and someone had stolen his razor. It had been hard to dispense with soap, and his stomach had craved the lost luxuries of civilised food. A woman had grown hysterical at the sight of her starving child, and an old man had coughed his life away while dreaming of the comfort of tobacco.

There had been many reasons, too many, and after the keen edge of despair had dulled a little, it seemed normal to gather the harvest and sell it to the trading post for what it would fetch. Others did it, why not he?

And so apathy had slowly and relentlessly undermined the first savage bitterness—and the price of the harvest remained as it was.

Chapter VIII

Thunder rumbled over the heavy air, the man-made thunder of sprouting venturis, and for a moment brilliant fire splashed across the heavens. Jim smiled, rolling on his side as he stared at the ascending spaceship, then relaxed with an easy grace.

"That's it, Mary. The last shipload of buttons at the old price."

"Tell me about it," she insisted. "You have a plan, I know that you have, what is it all about?"

He chuckled at the tense expression on her delicate features,

and restrained a desire to kiss her full red lips. He remembered his own appearance and sighed a little as he remembered her dead husband. Weak though he had been, yet he had been handsome. What could a woman like her see in a tramp like him?

"You asked me about the still," he said. "Remember?"

"You told me that we could all get drunk on crude alcohol, was it the truth?"

"Yes, but that wasn't the real reason for building it. Alcohol has more than one use, and the doctor and I found that it could do more than just get a man drunk, much more." He smiled as he stretched beneath the shade of a fern tree, and stared down at the thatched roofs of the settlement.

"We injected a little into one of the buttons, a minute puncture undiscoverable to the naked eye. The button seemed to be the same, but the alcohol had reduced the interior to a mass of slush." He glanced at the woman by his side. "The rejuvenating oil was broken down into simple elements, as valuable freight the button was a dead loss."

"I see. Did you know all this before?"

"Yes. When men first found what the buttons could do they tried every experiment imaginable to keep the extracted oil stable, pure alcohol was one of the many failures, and they must have forgotten all about it." He waved at the distant figure of the doctor, beckoning the tall man to join them.

"I knew about it, but I could do nothing with the knowledge until I could build a still. I had to wait until I could buy a worm, and by a lucky chance the doctor received a gift of medical supplies, a gift containing several hypodermic needles. Now do you understand?"

"You've injected all the buttons," she whispered. "I wondered why you wanted all the settlers to give you their harvests, you spoiled them before they were shipped. Jim!"

"Yes?"

"What will they do to you now? You've sold the company rubbish, cost them millions in freight and lost profit. What will they do?"

"Nothing." He smiled as the tall doctor dropped down beside them his thin features strained with fatigue. He nodded at Mary, and looked expressively at Jim.

"Well it's done now. What will happen next, Jim?"

"Mary was asking the same question, I'll give you the same answer. Nothing. Nothing will happen, what did you expect?" He laughed as he saw their tense expressions.

"What did you expect? Guards? Overseers with whips? Punishment? No. We shall remain just as we are, but now we can ask our own price for the buttons." He laughed again, then sobered as he saw their incredulity.

"Don't ever fall into the error of thinking of the company as an enemy. They are not our enemy and they never will be. They are business men, and as business men they must do things in a business-like fashion. I used to be one, and I know. It isn't business that is a threat to peace and security, exactly the opposite. Business wants a peaceful world, it wants a prosperous one. People cannot buy if they have no money, and they can't have money unless they can work as they wish. No. The real guardian of liberty and freedom is business, and never forget that."

"Exploiters," snapped the doctor. "You talk of them as though they had nothing to do with all this." He pointed towards the settlement. "Why are we here if it wasn't because of greed and the profit-grabbing policy of the company?"

"You make me sick," snapped Jim, "and for a medical man you show a surprising amount of sheer ignorance."

He deliberately grinned at the angry man.

"The company sold us passage here then took advantage of our presence to make a good trade. They didn't lure us here with false promises, they didn't employ us and then leave us stranded. They simply took us where we wanted to go."

"They could have told us what to expect, they knew what we wanted." The doctor was still angry.

"Why should they? It had nothing to do with the company what we thought, they told us the truth, the buttons are worth more than a hundred dollars a pound on Earth. If we filled in the rest to suit ourselves, then it was our fault."

"Why do you defend them?" Mary stared at Jim, her slender figure tense with repressed anger. "They killed my husband, ignored the horrible conditions here, turned civilised men into savages, and yet you seem to admire them."

"Who are you talking about?" Jim sat upright as he turned to stare at her. "Who are these mysterious people you refer to as 'them.' What are they? A group? An individual? A race? Explain yourself!"

"They are the company, the men who make all the money, the exploiters, the ones who have brought us to this!"

"They don't exist," said Jim calmly. "There is not one single individual who is responsible for what we do. The sole

purpose of the company is to **make** money, that is the sole purpose of any company. They can do it better if they give good service if their employees are happy, if they can sell their product. The one maxim of any business man is a simple one. Create a demand—then supply it!”

He squinted at the golden patch of the sun, and rubbed thoughtfully at his beard.

“The demand was created as soon as men found that the button-oil could restore their youth. The spaceship company was formed to supply that demand. To stay in business they must continue to supply it—and that makes us the most important people on two planets.”

“How do you mean?” The tall doctor laughed curtly as he stared at the almost naked man. “If we are important, then how is it that you can’t afford a shave?”

“Importance has nothing to do with money,” said Jim calmly. “Listen! The last three ships leaving here have been loaded with rubbish, buttons injected with alcohol from the still. Now what must happen? Immediately there is a tremendous demand for the buttons, and as the demand grows so the price will rise. Other ships will be built, lots of other ships, the buttons are the most profitable freight in the history of man. New companies will be formed as the demand for buttons makes them the most sought after thing ever known, and the monopoly will be broken.”

“I can follow that, but where do we come in?”

“They depend on us for the harvests. What else can they do? Employ men, and have to pay them high wages plus a guaranteed return passage? That will come expensive when each man will cost twenty thousand dollars return passage plus wages and cost of living. What else can they do then?”

“Pay us what we ask!” Mary sprang to her feet, her eyes shining. “Jim! Why didn’t you tell us all this before?”

“I saved it for a surprise.” He grew serious staring at the distant wire fence of the landing field. “I had to force the pace, ruin the last three cargoes of buttons, and cheat the factor. We can’t live for very long without the trade goods and I’m gambling that they need the buttons more than we need the salt.”

“Then it isn’t certain? We aren’t sure of getting what we want?” The tall doctor sagged, his thin features lined and anxious.

“No,” said Jim quietly. “It is still a gamble.”

He glanced towards the drifting masses of white clouds forever shielding the burning glory of the sun, his head cocked a

little as though he listened to a distant sound. He pointed, his face set and grim.

Thunder echoed from the heavens. Thunder and the stabbing fire of a landing spaceship.

Chapter IX

They were strange men to see on a pioneer world. To Jim they seemed almost alien in their well-cut clothing, their smooth massaged faces, their quiet voices and bulging brief cases. He stared at them, half-envying them their appurtenances of civilization and the calm business-like fashion in which they set to work. They were the official representatives of the company—and this was the show-down.

Max introduced them, Jim, the doctor, Mary and a few more from the settlement. By common consent Jim was the spokesman and they accepted this with the same smooth efficiency that seemed to characterise their every movement.

It was much like a board meeting on distant Earth.

"We have come to Venus to discover what is the trouble behind the non-delivery of buttons," said one of the men. He stared at the factor. "As our official representative here, you are of course to blame."

"I didn't know what they were doing," mumbled the fat man, he seemed shrunken and suddenly old. "I examined the buttons as usual." He stared accusingly at Jim. "I still don't know what happened."

"The last shipment before we left Earth was useless. The buttons had been injected with a foreign substance our chemists say was crude alcohol and the discovery was so shocking that we came at once." He stared at Jim. "Are the other shipments the same?"

"Yes."

"I see. Then in effect you have systematically robbed the company of more than six million dollars."

"We have robbed the company of nothing." Jim leaned back in his reed chair. "We sold goods to your factor, goods which he passed, and took their stated value in trade goods. What you have lost in the way of potential profits does not concern us."

"Granted, but you admit that we have lost both the profit and the cost of transportation?"

"Caveat Empor," quoted Jim cheerfully. "Let the buyer beware."

"Hardly ethical," said the man coldly, "but that is not the issue at the moment." He turned to the fat man sitting nervously at the end of the table. "You are of course relieved from duty. A new factor has been appointed and he will take over the trading post from you."

"Does that mean that I'm going home?"

"Perhaps. As you have failed your trust, the company will naturally expect you to pay your own passage. That is in your contract with us as you know."

"But I haven't got twenty thousand dollars," protested the fat man. "I can't pay."

The man shrugged.

"The worth of buttons on Earth at the moment is now more than three hundred dollars a pound. You will need sixty thousand to compensate for displaced cargo."

"Sixty thousand!" The fat man stared helplessly around him. Sweat began to ooze from his red face, dripping onto his sagging paunch. "I haven't got it, you know I haven't. Jim! You got me into this, you've got to get me out!"

"Steady, Max," warned Jim. "You haven't lost your job yet, and even if you do I can give you another."

"Job? What job?"

"Running the still." Jim laughed at their startled expressions. The neatly dressed man wasn't amused.

"Ah yes, the still," he said coldly. "That of course will have to be destroyed."

Jim stared at him, his eyes suddenly hard and almost feral. Idly his hand dropped to the hilt of his knife.

"Touch that still," he said quietly, "and I'll drive my knife into your throat, and that goes for any other man you may send."

Silence filled the heavy air of the trading post. Silence, and the delicate traces of a mounting tension. The man from Earth cleared his throat and glanced at his companions.

"You mean murder?" he asked quietly.

"No," said Jim. "I shall kill with all the due process of the law." He leaned across the rough table and smiled directly at the other man.

"I am entitled to guard my own property," he explained gently. "You see, I happen to own all the land for ten square miles around the spaceport."

He sat back and silence gathered in the room.

* * * *

The sun had almost set when they left the conference. Jim was smiling, the tall doctor shook his head in baffled wonder, and Mary seemed like a young girl again as she clung to Jim's arm.

"I can't believe it," muttered the tall doctor. He stared at Jim. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I wasn't too sure, not even up to the very end," said Jim slowly. "If anything went wrong then you could always put the blame on me, and little harm would have been done, as it is. . ."

"We have won!" The doctor straightened, and stared back at the glittering pillar of the spaceship. "Now we can really have the things we need. Two dollars a pound! More than any of us ever expected to get for the buttons."

"Enough," agreed Jim. "It's a start anyway."

"It's more than enough. Even with the freight costs making a passage home more than sixty thousand dollars we can still do it. Three years, maybe four, and the freight rates will drop as the harvests improve. We may even be home within two years. Think of it, Jim! Home!"

"Not for me." Jim smiled at the startled expression on the tall man's features. "I can't go home, and now I don't want to. This is my home, all this. A new fresh world!" He shook his head. "I filed squatters rights on this entire section and I didn't do it because I wanted to leave it. Five years I've waited. Five years of dragging hell, and now it's mine." He laughed as he remembered what had happened back in the trading post.

"They hadn't even thought of it, and with the precedent of Mars before them all the time. You remember that, Doc?"

The tall man nodded, a strange expression in his eyes. "Yes. They found radioactives in the deserts and one man stayed on a section for five years. No one knew it, but he'd filed squatters rights, he could do it because of an old law regarding the claiming of undeveloped land. The lawyers had a field day over it, some arguing that as it was extra-terrestrial land the laws didn't apply. The defence countered that if those laws didn't apply, which ones did?" The doctor shrugged.

"The claim was granted and the settler sold it for five million, then drank himself to death."

"Exactly. I knew of that old precedent, and it will be held valid in any court on Earth. I own this land. I sent the final papers to my lawyers just before we ruined the cargoes, and it's mine."

"What good is it?" Mary sounded bitter. "What do you intend doing with it, charging rent on the shacks?"

"No. I own it, and that means that I've a monopoly on all buttons gathered on my land. Don't you see it even now?" He halted and faced them, his eyes blazing as he strove to put his emotions into words.

"I own it! I can charge what I like for the buttons, and no one can stop me! I can raise the price so high that it will be cheaper for the old men and women of Earth to come here for their treatment, rather than pay the exorbitant prices for the longevity serum on Earth! I shall swing the trade away from the home planet! I shall bring the money to Venus, and with the money will come everything we can ever want!"

He quietened himself as he saw understanding dawn on their faces, and resumed walking towards the huts of the settlement.

"It will take time of course, and it must be done carefully and gently. At no time must we allow it to be cheaper for the company to build a new spaceport and gather their own harvest. We must always cut the price to a level where it will be good business to deal with us, and bad business to collect for themselves. Other ships will land here of course, new ships from new companies, and once built those ships must be made to pay. We can operate our own separation plant, extract the oil, and give the rejuvenation treatment ourselves. It will be all profit, and we must give it at a price which will attract people to Venus."

"It might work," said the doctor slowly. "It will have to be done with care, but it might work at that."

"It will work," promised Jim firmly. "It can't help but work. Economics will make it work, business, call it what you like, but it must work. It just can't help it."

"What of the people who want to go home?" Mary stared at the playing children in the streets of the settlement. "What of them?"

"Those who want to go, can go, but who will want to? They have a stake here, on Earth they have nothing. Wait until the

money begins pouring in, until the machinery arrives and comforts. A pretty dress can work wonders with any woman, and what man would give up this ideal for a factory?"

Flame thundered from the heavens as a spaceship lowered itself carefully through the clouds towards the landing field. Jim stared at it and smiled, pressing Mary's arm as he stood with her by his side.

"Here they come," he murmured. "The trade ships bearing the seeds of a new civilisation." He looked down at the woman his eyes tender as he searched her delicate features. She smiled up at him and gently touched his chin.

"Beaver!"

"I'll shave," he promised. "I'll shave every day, twice a day if you want me to. Mary?"

"Yes?"

He swallowed and stood looking at her, frightened to put what he felt into words. A scavenger beetle scurried over the rich black loam, touching her naked foot, and with a little scream she clung tightly to him.

"Yes, Jim," she whispered. "Yes!"

He kissed her then, kissed her as he had often imagined kissing her, hungrily, greedily, pressing her to him and tasting the sweetness of her lips.

A soft breeze blew across the tops of the towering fern trees, and the doctor shifted impatiently as he stared at the young couple. Like savages, he thought dispassionately. Dressed in beaten bark, with sandals lashed to their feet and dirt on their skins.

Savages.

Yet they had what no savage ever had. They had minds honed and whetted, trained and hardened by a civilisation more tough and feral than any jungle could ever be. They would marry and rear children to inherit a new world. A clean world.

He sighed and moved away.

SCIENTIFILM PREVIEWS

News and previews for science-fiction film fans

From **FORREST J. ACKERMAN**

Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Martians! Also, I have just set a new world record for holding my breath. For 85 of the most thrilling, gratifying minutes of my life I sat in Paramount's private theatre at the Studio and forgot to breathe as I watched, spellbound, the magnificent picturization of the classic that is a favourite of every fan: **THE WAR OF THE WORLDS**. Friends, it is tremendous—all we could hope for — a thing of beauty and joy forever. A splendid screenplay by (British, I believe) Barré Lyndon, aided and abetted by inspired technicians. You've been hearing about the incipient three-dimensional revolution in Hollywood: well, this tremendous production (DeMille would have been proud of it) is *fear*-dimensional! No polaroid spectacles needed to scare you out of your wits with *this* film; if those solaroid heat-rays of the Martians don't leap right off the screen and singe your eyebrows, you, friend, have a financially assured future in renting yourself out as a snowman. No fan, man or critic (sub-man, that is) in his right senses is going to pan this picture. Take it from me, who's seen 'em all for 25 years, this is the topper, the stopper, the dream pic and the super click. In my opinion, the author would have applauded it. I beg of you, as a fan of William Temple's, don't let that noted Wellsophile see this picture—keep him from it at all costs, if you ever want him to write another great novel like "The Four-Sided Triangle"—because a boy like Bill would go mad with joy. Myself, I merely expect to go broke buying tickets. I last saw **THINGS TO COME** the 28th time

in London: I've a feeling I'll exceed my record on **WAR OF THE WORLDS**. The narration, adopting and adapting a number of Wells' own words, is in the rich, stimulating voice of Sir Cedric Hardwicke: *Little did mankind imagine, in the middle of the 20th century, that human affairs were being watched keenly and closely by intelligences greater than man's and yet as mortal as his own. . . Across the gulf of space, minds that are to our minds as ours are to those of the beasts that perish, intellects vast and cool and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes, and slowly and surely drew their plans against us.* As these Wellsian words are being spoken, we fans get a visual bonus by way of a series of Bonestellian models and painting montages, virtually an advance sampling of Pal's next production, **THE CONQUEST OF SPACE**, as we are transported by the consummate artistry of Mr. B. to the distant, frozen wastes of Pluto, the scintillant rings of Saturn, the molten surface of Mercury, and the red and dying planet Mars itself, with its thin, cold winds keening over the symmetrical canals. Cinemanagers' chief additional expense in exploiting this picture will be an extra corps of ushers, required to quieten the ebullient fen in the audience who will be subjected to uncontrollable fits of ecstasy, during which they may unconsciously cry out "*Hallelujah!*" The picture, with certain modernizations such as the introduction of an atom bomb 10 times more powerful than those presently admitted, is quite reasonably faithful to the original plot, as I recall it, including the "surprise" denouement,

which will, of course, surprise only laymen in the audience, and not the aficionados. If, as I, you have come from the theatre on previous occasions, feeling that your appetite for spectacle was merely whetted by say *Destination Moon* or *When Worlds Collide*, you will surely suffer no complaint on this score with *THE WAR*. Friends, wait till you glimpse those Martians! those nega-magnetically motivated war machines! those superbly beautifully, believably picturize force-screens! An Ack-olade to all who made this masterpiece possible.

In the next breath I weep to report that murder most foul has been done that manuscript most fair, *The Four-Sided Triangle*. Wendayne (my wife) and I agreed, after the sneak American preview (where we met producer Alex Paal) that this sorry excuse for a cinemadaptation of Temple's triumph should not have been released but buried. Save your money for a showing of:

The Magnetic Monster. Granted — this horror-mongering title is enough to scare away any self-respecting fan; nevertheless, once you get inside the theatre you'll see (as I have already seen 3 times, in the company of Ray Bradbury, A. E. van Vogt, Sherwood Springer, E. Everett Evans, Ray Harryhausen, S. J. Byrne and a number of other local s.f. celebrities who were enthusiastic about it) quite a creditable scientifilm. Coscripted by Curt Siodmak, who gave us *Floating Platform No. 1*, *TransAtlantic Tunnel* and a previous version of *Donoan's Brain* which is now being refilmed, it develops one of science fiction's basic themes—Earth's imminent doom. Radioactive selenium (artificial element No. 116) has been created by Dr. Denker, who discovers to his horror that his neo-metal is hungry and must be fed every eleven hours — increasingly large charges of electricity—or it implodes

and magnetizes all metallic objects around it. The time comes when all of my home town (Los Angeles) has to be blacked out in order for its dynamocs to feed the insatiable appetite of the growing, growing metal monster. And after that—all the power of Boulder Dam will be forfeit for the voracious World Eater. Then—*how long left?* Jeff Stewart (Richard Carlson), an atomic trouble-shooter of the Office of Scientific Investigation known as an A-Man, consults the Mathematical Analyzer Numerical Integrator and Computer (familiarily: the "Maniac") and is near-panicked by the ultimatum of the brain machine: 900 million volts might overfeed and "choke" to death the Devourer. . . but is there an instrument any where in the world capable of generating that much energy? The Deltatron, a secret Canadian project, has only a 600 million max. But, if not destroyed at the eleventh hour, the prospect is that the selenium will increase its size till it lobs the Earth right out of its orbit! The climax is one of the greatest spectacles for eye-and-ear ever seen and heard on the silver screen. Ivan Tors, the to-be-commended producer, tells me he will next film *The Meteor Hunters*, an original by Siodmak.

In my concluding paragraph I have just room to tell you that *MOON BASE* by Robert Heinlein and Jack Seaman has been completed, and the world's first full-length trimensional scientifilm is underway at Universal Studios: *It Came from Outer Space*, a suspensory of arachnoid visitation from the void with a Who Goes There theme. Watch, in future columns for reports on "Project X," "Space Station: U.S.A.," "The Fatal Planet," "Robot Killer," "Invaders from Mars," "The Bug-Eyed Monster" . . . and such possibilities as *SLAN* and *The Nth Man*!

THE ELECTRIC FAN

News and Views from the World's Favourite Science Fiction Fan

WALTER A. WILLIS

When you go burying your nose in this magazine to get that nice new-book smell, don't do it between these pages. Ordinarily I'd be only too happy to have you use my column for a nasal cemetery, but this time it wouldn't be safe. This instalment is being written while I'm suffering from flu, gravely complicated by something called influenza. It must be a particularly violent form of it too, because I've already used up two boxes of sulfa pills and one doctor. The poor fellow took one look at me and then went to bed with nausea and a high temperature. People don't usually get a high temperature from looking at me, however much they may claim I make their blood boil, and this worried my sensitive soul. I visualised myself as a Scourge, eliminating one by one the entire medical profession, perhaps even the human race, and finally dying alone behind barbed-wire entanglements while the survivors argued whether I should be atom-bombed, fired off into space, or merely walled in with lead. However the second doctor lurked at a safe distance, just sending a volunteer nurse into the area with a syringe full of penicillin, and it looks as if we may all live.

On the whole I can't recommend flu as a disease for fans. From time immemorial we have been looking for a nice little disease that is just serious enough to keep us away from work, but not serious enough to interfere with the really important activities of life like reading science fiction, writing, and looking out for the postman. Some fans claim to have discovered such a disease, they call it Stigwort's

Disease and point out that it is the most dangerous disease of all because it has *absolutely no symptoms*! You don't even know you have it and might go on living with it in ignorance for eighty, maybe a hundred years. . . then poof; out you go like a light. Horrifying. But though obviously it must be pretty common it hasn't yet been recognised by our backward medical authorities, and as fans will just have to continue looking among their existing stock. Definitely this flu thing won't do.

Your editor suggests that this time I might review some fanmags. A good idea, son. I could almost forgive you for that Electric Fan title. He also suggests that maybe I could be a bit funnier this time. Nerve! Friends, you won't believe this, but as originally written the first two instalments of this column were so brilliant, so crammed with wit and humour, and so obviously the work of an inspired genius, that your editor was afraid the rest of the magazine would be completely overshadowed by them. Accordingly he substituted something less spectacular and sold the original manuscripts to a syndicate of radio script-writers for an enormous sum.

I said you wouldn't believe it. Ah well, on to the reviews.

SPACE TIMES, December, 1952/January, 1953. Published by Eric Jones for the Northwest Science Fantasy Club of Manchester. Editor Eric Bencliffe, 47 Alldis St., Stockport, Cheshire, Subscription 6/- a year (12 issues). This is really two separate issues of ST, huddled together for warmth in the financial

blizzard which recently struck the N.S.F.C. Among the cleverer items is a wicked parody of the weighty, not to say heavy type of article that Ken Slater likes to write about semi-mythological characters such as Robin Hood. The anonymous parodist (suspected of being London fan Vince Clarke) knifes various respected fan personalities in the back in the course of a dead-pan biography of one Roobin Hod, complete with scholarly footnotes and an epitaph reading:

"Benyth thys clodd lyes Hod the Ghod,

"Thou'rt trod t'sod o'er a reet odd bod."

There are also two instalments of a well-written column by one Dale Smith of America, the first devoted to telling us how much better off everyone is in America than we are here, and the second to bemoaning the fact that the life of science fiction magazines is limited to a couple of hundred years on account of "the oxidising effects of sunlight and oxygen." Obviously Mr. Smith's conscience has been gnawing him after he wrote that heartless first instalment and he is trying tactfully to make amends for having reminded his Manchester friends of their terrible plight. His message of hope is that while they may all be perishing miserably from starvation, poverty, and ignorance of the American way of life, they can at least die happy in the assurance that their collections will live after them, preserved for eternity against oxidising agents by the inimitable climate of their city.

OPERATION FANTAST, Winter, 1952. Editor Capt. K. F. Slater, 13 Gp. R.P.C., B.A.O.R. 29. Subscriptions: four issues for 5/- or 75c. This issue starts off with a bang-up-to-the-year report on the 1952 London Convention called "With

Bentcliffe and Cohen Through Darkest Bloomsbury." I wondered about the reference to "darkest" Bloomsbury until I realized that the black rectangles lying here and there about the report like coffins were intended to be photographs of the proceedings. They look as if they had been taken in a coal cellar by someone with a broken cigarette lighter and unquenchable optimism. However the report itself, by Peter Campbell, is bright enough to make up for them. The last thing in the issue is a short but completely pointless story about a were-skunk. It stinks. Fortunately the rest of *OPERATION FANTAST*, reviews of mags and books and articles about writers and writing, is of the usual high standard. The only item I found disappointing was one called "Lovecraft's Amateur Press Works." This sounded a nice cheerful article and I started it full of interest to find out what had been wrong with the press in the first place and how they'd managed to get it going again. Imagine my disappointment when it turned out to be just a list of hitherto unknown works by H. P. Lovecraft, the Weird Horror author of American Literature. I don't know why they keep digging up more of this stuff when no one can read what's cluttering up the place already. Let's hope they eventually find something worth reading, even if it's only a dirty limerick Lovecraft threw off in a human moment.

Well, that'll have to be all the reviews for now—I'm beginning to see spots before my eyes again. Nothing serious, I suppose, but I can't help feeling my eyes should see them first. However I'll probably be recovered in time to see you at the London Convention, Bonnington Hotel, 23/24 May. (Particulars from Convention Secretary, White Horse Tavern, Fetter Lane, London E.C. 4.)

GUIDED MISSIVES

Letters to the Editor

DEAR ED: Having just finished reading No. 2 of your brain-child "Nebula," I had to write to give my impressions on the issue.

The cover picture is a decided improvement on your first issue. Alan seems to be learning the art quickly, if he continues to improve at this rate, he will soon be as firmly established in cover work as he now is in interior illustration line. Interior illos were both quite competent, and also very similar in style. I must admit a slight preference for Price's effort, if only because I prefer a half-page cut to a full-page one.

"Thou Pasture Us" came an easy first in the story stakes not only because of its length, but because it was generally well-written, plausible and interesting. Its drawback was the lifeless characters of Tannoy's family and his daughter's boy-friend.

Brainpower was quite good, but I must confess to becoming confused between Federations, Ambassadors and Scientists. "Dark Solution" was competent, without being outstanding.

Now for an idea which may help win that cover-original: I have yet to see either Nebula or any other British s.f. magazine on a bookstall, in open display, but I presume that such things do happen in some cities and towns, if not in Sheffield. Anyway, when that happens the mag must nearly always depend on its cover for selling power. Being a school teacher, I know that children will always find some way of buying a magazine bearing either a space-ship, or a robot. Putting these points together, might it not be a good idea to embody these, and other s.f. items in cover illos at

every possible chance. I know you are not aiming specifically at the juvenile market, but even adult s.f. lovers may not take that second glance which scans the sub-title 'science-fiction.' Make the first glance count and the second, and more will follow.

TERRY JEEVES,
Sheffield.

** Well, Terry, that idea of yours wins the original cover of this issue of Nebula. Glad you enjoyed issue 2. Write again.*

DEAR ED: I have read Nebula with interest and enjoyment, but cannot too strongly endorse Lugos' letter in issue No. 1. I regard letters to fiction magazines as a waste of space and money, so regret the mag is only worth 1/11 $\frac{3}{4}$. I do not want to meet other fans or know what they think of you, me, the stories, each other or the Universe. I am willing to pay 2/- for a good magazine, but want it full of meat, not mush. So abolish your Guided Missives.

V. LELEUX, A.C.W.A.

Surrey.

** No comment.*

DEAR ED: "Thou Pasture Us" was pretty high standard Rayer, in fact one of the best things he's done. He handles his plots very well when he avoids his tendency to lose his way in purple passages. This was quite a good, fast-moving thriller.

I think I preferred Brunner's story though. An almost new idea, very neatly handled. I think it would go over well.

I don't know whether Tubb's

story will be as popular, but for my money it was the best in the issue. It puts over a message that can never be given too often, and does it with real impact. Technically, this yarn is in some ways the best Tubb has done yet.

All in all, Peter, this was an excellent issue and a couple more of this standard will really put you right at the top in a way that one issue, however good, can never do.

WALTER A. WILLIS,
Belfast.

**I'll certainly try to maintain (and improve) the standard set in issue 2.*

DEAR ED: Nebula No. 2 was a definite advance over No. 1 and Rayers yarn was one of his best to date. John Brunners yarn was also good and, whilst I am not a liker of the type of yarn that represented Ted Tubb (he is putting ideas into peoples heads!) it was a very novel idea, and well written.

I don't know whether I was more bored by Forry Ackerman's yarn or his film news. Poor Forry. I admire the man, but it is very rarely I like one of his yarns—they are always too short—and more suited to fanzines than prozines, and with his film news, I wish he would list fewer titles and say more about ones he has left. The Willis; good as ever.

CAPT. KEN SLATER,
B.A.O.R. 29

**Don't you think, Ken, that the "idea" put over in "Dark Solution" could possibly be a very good one?*

DEAR MR. HAMILTON: I am at the present moment enjoying F. G. Rayer's lead novel about the Heavenly Toys. Nebula is a handsome publication, and I wish you all possible success.

ROBERT A. HEINLEIN,
Colorado, U.S.

**Thanks for the kind letter Mr. Heinlein. I hope you enjoy future issues too.*

DEAR ED: I really think you'll have to do better than this if you want to push Nebula to the heights.

The only thing I saw in its favour was Rayer's novel—and apparently Rayer always writes good novels. The cover—important as ever—was worse than any I've seen for a long time. Not only was it childish in style, it was anaemic, and anyone who still doubts that Hunter can't paint, needs his brains tested. The short by Brunner was very amateurish. Forry Ackerman should be ashamed to let you publish such trash as his "Atoms and Stars." Even Tubbs short, though better than the others sadly lapses in places.

After all this, I hope you will look to your laurels (if you have any left) and escape from the rut you've jumped into.

JOHN GUTTERIDGE,
Surrey.

**Well, John, as you see you disagree with nearly everyone else who wrote in. Even you enjoyed "Thou Pasture Us," which occupied 94 of the 120 pages in the magazine. Actually, "Atoms and Stars" was something of an Editorial experiment and I can promise it won't happen again.*

CLASSIFIED ADS.

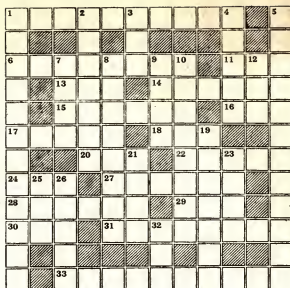
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LET'S have a Mancon next year!

S.F.
CROSSWORD
PUZZLE
by
A. C. THORNE



CLUES ACROSS.

1. You need another dimension to construct these!
6. This varies from planet to planet.
11. Kind of hill-dweller.
13. It will all be gone within 300 years!
14. You need more of 13 to get this!
15. Highest.
16. This applied to fans, means new readers of science-fiction.
17. This usually contains money.
18. Manufactured from coal.
20. Signifies nothing more.
22. Native of Africa.
24. A horse.
27. To effect an electric charge.
28. Fantasy writers must find it hard to continually do this.
29. These with downs make life what it is.
30. Not the sort of crib used in examinations.
31. Like a hermit.
33. The best electrical insulators are this. (3, 2, 5)

CLUES DOWN.

1. Almost every spaceship has one of these.
2. Useful for observing the sun's corona.
3. The smallest one is necessary to every machine.
4. Certain microscope slide samples need this.
5. Apertaining to the stars.
7. Connected with you.
8. An oxide of iron and titanium first found in Russia!
9. A germ-carrier.
10. The first spaceship will be sure to utilise some of this.
12. The lady used to have a different name.
19. Only a temporary postponement.
21. The hero of a space-opera is usually one of these.
23. A story, but not necessarily science-fiction.
25. Trouble, fuss and bother!
26. If you don't like one story you'll probably do this to the next. (3,2)
32. A character often found in fantasy fiction.

AS HEALER. One Lady writes: "My sister suffered very badly for years, but since I gave her a Joan the Wad to keep near her she is much easier. Do you think this is due to Joan or the water from the Lucky Well?"

AS LUCK BRINGER. Another writes: "Since the war my wife and I have been dogged by persistent ill-luck and we seemed to be sinking lower and lower. One day someone sent us a Joan the Wad. We have never found out who it was, but, coincidence if you like, within a week I got a much better job and my wife had some money left her. Since then we have never looked back and, needless to say, swear by 'Queen Joan'."

AS MATCHMAKER. A young girl wrote and informed me that she had had

scores of boy friends, but it was not until she had visited Cornwall and taken Joan back with her that she met the boy of her dreams, and as they got better acquainted she discovered he also has "Joan the Wad."

AS PRIZEWINNER. A young man wrote us only last week:

"For two years I entered competitions without luck, but since getting Joan the Wad I have frequently been successful although I have not won a big prize. But I know that. . . who won £2,000 in a competition has one because I gave it to him. When he won his £2,000 he gave me £100 for myself, so you see I have cause to bless Queen Joan."

DO YOU BELIEVE IN LUCK?

HURRY

Mrs. WILSON, of Fal-

mouth, says, 1951:
Since receiving Joan
the Wad . . . my hus-
band's health has im-
proved 100%.

Mr. Jones, of Chelten-
ham, says, 1951:

. . . Send me J. O'Lan-
tern. Since receiving
Joan the Wad have won
two 1st prizes in Cross-
words. . . *John Bull* and
Sunday Chronicle.

SEND NOW

JOAN THE WAD

is Queen of the Lucky Cornish
Piskeys. Thousands of persons all
over the world claim that she has
brought them Wonderful Luck in
the way of Health, Wealth and
Happiness.

HISTORY FREE FOR A STAMP

If you will send me your name and
address, a 1/- stamp and a stamped
addressed envelope for reply, I will
send you a history of the Cornish
Piskey folk, and the marvellous
miracles they accomplish.



AS SPECULATOR. A man
writes: "I had some shares that
for several years I couldn't give
away. They were 1/- shares and all
of a sudden they went up in the
market to 7/9. I happened to be
staring at Joan the Wad. Pure im-
agination you may say, but I
thought I saw her wink approvingly
I sold out, reinvested the money at
greater profit and have prospered
ever since."

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